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Robert E. Mills

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PROLOGUE

An Empire in Disorder

Truly, the beings of our time live in an age of wonders, the Age of the Impossible. The League of Free Worlds and the Fellowship of Light have thus far successfully defied the awful and immortal star-tyrant, Ylang-Ylang. Master Garthane's daring plan to attack the very heart of the Dark Empire has met with success; the black planet Flaigon, ancient homeworld of the emperor and the seat of its power, has been destroyed. Red Rian the star-pirate, the first being to successfully defy the empire in aeons, has met in mortal combat with Ylang's steward, Blorg the Devastator, and left him broken and dying. The galaxies of Taylos and Havanal, and others beyond them, have recently been liberated; and rebellion spreads throughout the length and breadth of the Dark Empire.

But the tyrant out-lived its homeworld and escaped, transferring its court to the mysterious world known as Kallidor, located in the one galaxy

within all the vast realms of the great slave empire that remains unsubdued . . . for reasons unknown to the allies. In order to enlist the aid of its hosts, who possess incredible powers of mind, the Dark Emperor has offered these remarkable beings the one thing they do not possess . . . the secret of immortality, the means to voyage over the sea of time and arrive at its farthest shores.

And yet, Ylang-Ylang has not had things all its own way. The Kallidorians, those strange and super-cerebral entities, apparently know the Great Devourer well, and are wary of its capacity for endless evil and deception. But they are also sorely tempted by its offer of an eternal and god-like existence. Their power, combined with the vast might and immense resources of the Dark Empire (beset with troubles though it presently is), would be likely to ensure the ultimate triumph of Ylang's imperialist designs.

Should the Kallidorians decide to throw in their lot with the Dark Emperor, it is doubtful that any force the allies are able to assemble–of whatever magnitude–would be capable of stemming the tide of darkness and horror that the tyrant has loosed among the stars. Thus, in this Age of Wonders, this most perilous and exciting of all times, the future of freedom throughout the known universe hangs in the balance.

The Chronicles of Tallin

Haaass! Haaass! Quaarg the Destroyer hissed his reptiloid annoyance as he paced restlessly back and forth in the sprawling gardens that surrounded the magnificent dwellings of Ylang's hosts, trampling down rows of flowers of matchless scent and

beauty. Months had passed since the Devourer made its irresistible offer, but still the Kallidorians, those canny and incomprehensible creatures, conferred and debated among themselves and continued to probe the near-infinite and terrible mentality of the Dark Emperor.

They were terrible in their own right, the Kallidorians; Quaarg saw that fact amply demonstrated when they rent and sundered the bright ships of the League and rescued mighty Ylang. And they were no fools, either: they had some mysterious past knowledge of the immortal emperor, and consequently displayed much patience and cunning in their dealings with the Great Seducer. It seemed to the reptiloid that the damnable round of discussion, debate and negotiation could go on endlessly.

And while it did, the enemy grew bolder and stronger . . . and the empire continued to come apart at the seams. The League of Free Worlds kept pushing forward, guided by the Fellowship of Light, tearing great gaping holes in the fabric of empire and encouraging rebellion in a multitude of star-seas.

Taylos, Havanal, Aiira, Malat, Phorbos, Tenara, Great Horm and Lesser Horm, Toofaido, Balczas, Narra: the list grows longer every day! thought Quaarg, fuming as he reached out his four clutching hands and deliberately strangled a row of delicate, long-stemmed Sunwatchers. *Ylang bargains casually with these entities and plays a waiting game, while the empire goes to hell!*

Things began to go wrong and fall apart after the bombardment of Flaigon. Quaarg shook his black-helmeted head and wiped the morning dew

off his one-way visor as he thought about it. *The presumption of that old humanoid ape, Garthane!* Quaarg's outrage (for he had personally witnessed that unthinkable spectacle) caused his huge, black-body-armored frame to stiffen into immobility, his arms stretched out in the air above his head, hands flexed and reaching out for the sun of Kallidor, as if he wished to extinguish its offending light.

Garthane is first on my death-list, he thought. *Even before that Taylian scum, Rian . . . whom I actually owe a debt of gratitude for ridding me of the one obstacle to my ambition–Blorg the Devastator! In gratitude for that kindness, I shall grant him a swift death.* (Quaarg was grateful in his way, for the Ysss are connoisseurs of death, and a swift death is the greatest gift they can bestow on an enemy.)

Quaarg resumed his restless pacing and trampling. On hearing that Flaigon had been blasted to smithereens, the armada that was headed for the Primula galaxy turned back immediately. The Ysss overlords in command scattered and sped off with their respective forces, anxious to secure for themselves the domains they had administered in the emperor's name. But they soon had their four hands full, as word of Flaigon's end (and the rumor of Ylang's end with it) spread through the stars like atomic fire. And then, to add insult to injury, the Ysss even fought among themselves, each commander harboring in the depths of his fierce reptilian heart the secret desire to become the new master of the Dark Empire.

But at last the word of the Devourer's survival had spread among the captive star-seas, and the

imperial forces were able to begin the arduous process of consolidation. Of course, Quaarg had to go and exterminate great numbers of his more ambitious fellows and replace them with younger and more trusted Ysss; but the tide had turned, and soon they would be able to deal with the rebels . . . and the enemy.

If only the Devourer would give me the supreme power, he thought, still puzzled by his inscrutable master's failure to name him steward of the Dark Empire. Blorg was dead, there was no doubt of that—Quaarg had seen his body after Rian had broken it: nothing, no mortal creature, could have conceivably survived such a terrible beating.

Then Ylang had sent for the dying Blorg . . . to say farewell to his "son," Quaarg imagined, and then—doubtless—devour him and savor the agonies of his death. That was the only logical conclusion . . . . So why had Ylang not proclaimed him, Quaarg, the new lord of all the Ysss? What was the Devourer waiting for?

How long, O Ylang? How long? the reptiloid screamed telepathically to the fair skies of Kallidor. *Why do we not fill the star-seas with blood and twisted iron, with billowing black clouds and shrieks of pain? Why must we wait?*

Haaa-aa-ass-s-s-s! Haaa-aa-ass-s-s-s! Hissing like steam escaping from the cauldron of vengeance, Quaarg the Destroyer strode off, taking his dark and impotent rage deeper into the bright, sunlit garden . . . .

Dann Oryzon opened his eyes and smiled back at the morning sun that awakened him with the sweetness of a lover's kiss. He yawned and

stretched and got out of bed, breathing the air deeply, feeling the fullness of youth and vigor rise in his body, warming him as if the sun itself were in his belly.

He walked across the length of the chamber, stopped before a lenticular mirror, and stared at his reflection. *Scar's gone,* he thought, running his hand through the thatch of brown, curly hair that had grown back rapidly after the pre-operative shaving of his skull. He marvelled at the psycho-surgical skill of the doctors at Astyx, the place where Garthane had sent him after rescuing the Hazard and its crew from the shipwreck on the wasteworld of X-8, or Azitlin, as its natives called it.

Dann had been in a deep coma for several weeks, hovering between life and death; or worse, an impaired, vegetable existence. But his dear frienee, Altektu and D-Anacom, the gentle and wise soft machines, had pulled him through. And here he was, feeling as good this morning as he ever had in the short span of his young life. And part of this recovery he owed to another person, someone who had nursed him through his coma and delirium, someone who had been at his side in all her waking moments.

Dann smiled at himself in the mirror when he thought of her, of her gentleness and kindness, her sweetness and her beauty. He had helped her once, and then she repaid the debt a hundred times over. Medicine and technology were largely responsible for saving Dann's life, but Valennia's concern did much to strengthen his will-to-live.

And Val herself had recovered remarkably from the violations of mind and body inflicted upon her

when the Dark Empire raped her homeworld. Altektu and D-Ana, with all their wealth of sensitivity and therapeutic skills, had been unable to reach her . . . until Dann, using the telepathic powers he had developed through his initiation into the Fellowship of Light, entered her mind and secured her trust, enabling her to purge herself of the horror that ran cold and deep in the dark pools of her eyes, to renew her link with the world of the living.

Valennia had been through terrible things, but once she had been reached, the strength and resilience of her spirit enabled her to recover swiftly. She was young, she was strong, and the beauty of her face and form was matched by an inner beauty, Dann had discovered. And now they were friends: they had shared confidences and an adventure, shared hopes and dreams and laughter. He felt they were friends in the finest and deepest humanoid sense of the word.

Dann stared at his reflection and was seized by wonder, as he suddenly realized that he had changed. He had grown somehow . . . older . . . different. And what he saw in the mirror reminded him of the faces of his friends, when he finally saw them again after the liberation of his homeworld, Aquaea. They had all changed—his young neighbors, his schoolmates, his best friend, Zak Spar: life had left its mark on their faces; the Infinite had touched them and brought them over into the adult world of change and loss, of struggle and disappointment . . . . They had grown up. They had become aware, in some unspoken way, of the secrets of growth and change, the sweet, hard wisdom of death and transformation, the mysterious formula of mortality . . . .

The universe was a bright place for Dann Oryzon, even though it was a universe embattled, a universe threatened by a gathering tidal wave of incomprehensible darkness and savagery. But Dann's thoughts were not on the universe as he smiled into the mirror. They were not even on his lovely and tender friend, Val. They were halfway across the Primula galaxy, in Libera, capital city of the golden planet, Aurea Solis . . . with Nila.

Willowy Nila, golden-haired Nila: with skin that gleamed like burnished copper and eyes that beckoned like the grey oceans of Aquaea . . . . He remembered her quiet courage just as vividly as he did her bright smile. And soon he'd be with her again, on Greeb. They'd all be together again: his father, Garthane; his friends, Purpur, Ween and the Taylian pirates; his rival . . . Red Rian.

The time had almost come; Nila would soon have to make her often-postponed and long-awaited decision. *She'll finally have to choose between me and Rian . . . and decide which one of us she'll take for her lover.*

Dann's smile banked down into an anxious grimace. He was nervous about Nila's impending decision. Like the star-pirate, he had absolutely no idea which one of them she would choose.

Rian's one hell of a guy, he thought. *A little old for Nila, maybe–but one hell of a guy . . . . What am I gonna do if she picks Rian? What if she does?. . . Well, at least it'll be over. At least it'll be decided.*

He shrugged his shoulders and turned away from the mirror. Just as he did, the door *whooshed* open and his friends walked in. The two tall and graceful androids, their eyes glowing in the fine-

planed setting of their emerald-green perma-flesh faces, flanked the short and full-bodied raven-haired beauty whose eyes shone like deep mountain pools under the light of the stars.

And Dann, who had learned from the Fellowship to live in the eternal present, came back to it eagerly. Feeling the sun caress his back with infinite tenderness, he said good morning to his friends, to the present . . . and meant it.

In a far corner of the Primula galaxy, on the planet Palos, in the outworlds of the Nova Vega system, on the edge of a sweeping red plain, in a great citadel carved out of the living rock by neither hand nor machine, in that citadel's highest temple, a wonder was about to take place . . . .

Around an inner circle composed of the Fellowship of Light's remaining two hundred members, men and women whose lives spanned more than two centuries, thousands of purple-cowled initiates stood, their numbers forming the periphery of a much larger circle. The eyes of the initiates were alight with the fire of mystical illumination; their faces were bright with the vitality of their youth. And they all chanted along with the old ones, and intoned the same single word: *One*.

In the center of the inner circle, his eyes rolled up in their sockets, his face transfigured by the bliss of union with the Infinite, stood Garthane, the tall and grey-bearded, craggy-featured High Master of the Fellowship. He had just finished his address to the new members. Smiling serenely, he stepped back into the inner circle and addressed the initiates through the medium of telepathy.

Come join us, sons and daughters of life, he told

them. *Come merge your minds with ours, and partake of the sweetness and power of the Infinite, of the dark heart of the universe.* Counterpointing his thoughts was the mental chorus of the older members: *One . . . One . . . One . . . . We are all one.* And after that, Garthane's mind addressed them again: *Come join us. Raise yourselves up and be one with us.* The bodies of Garthane and the older members began to leave the ground.

I will, my brothers and sisters, the initiates replied in a great mental unison, *I will!* And then they felt that part of them that was their flesh rise into the air as they chanted *One . . . One . . . One . . . . We are all one.* Their bodies levitated ten feet above the ground as they joined their elders in the deep and soul-satisfying communion known as a mind-link. . . .

CHAPTER ONE

Ween Leever Comes Home

"Attention all hands: this is your captain speaking," Red Rian said with unaccustomed formality, after activating the Hazard's intercom. The speakers in the control-center crackled as the crew broke into exaggerated cheers.

"All right. Shape-up and simmer down, you Taylian gas-bags," the star-pirate continued, shaking his head. "Keep it down. I'm just reminding you bozos to put on a good show when we get to Greeb . . . for our pride and joy, our own little Ween Nerdeen."

"*Rian, you cut that out!*" Ween's voice spluttered over the speakers, as the boy-genius objected to the use of his rhyming Greeban middle name.

The crew roared and guffawed over the speakers, and Rian grinned wickedly as he nudged his felinoid co-pilot in the ribs. Purpur rolled his eyes and shook his head, obviously underwhelmed. He never ceased to be amazed at the indirect and

teasing games humanoids used to express deep affection.

"Whether you know it or not," Rian went on, warming to his little primate-game, "we will all be on display once we touch-down on the planet's surface. We come as heroes and noble examples to the youth of a dozen galaxies, so I want the crew of this starship to conduct itself with a dignity consistent with its elevated status."

The pirates howled at this.

"One more thin," Rian said. "I want you guys all to remember that down there on his homeworld, everybody's gonna call the kid by his middle name—that's the custom. And if any of you flat-footed garaboons so much as titters when they do—*and I'm dead serious now, lads*—he'll have to go below-decks with me or Mr. Purpur. Got that?"

As the crew's muttered affirmatives came growling over the speakers, Rian turned to his first mate and winked conspiratorially. "Got 'em good that time, didn't I? Hah?"

Purpur shrugged his shoulders and gurgled an ambiguous feline gurgle. He found the humanoid sense of humor very strange indeed.

All day the massive black starships thundered down to the spacedrome, forming ominous clusters on the bright landing surface. Their dark, gleaming outer-plating lent them an aspect of brooding menace, the look of a swarm of monster-locusts poised and ready to overrun the green world that lay before them.

Columns of black-uniformed equerries ringed the spacedrome, ready to escort the officers on board the starships to the bright, polyhedral com-

plex of buildings that housed the Dark Emperor and his retinue. As each vessel's hatch *whooshed* open and its flexiladder came to rest on the ground, a compliment of tall, powerful figures began to file out into the glowing sunlight. The Ysss high command had come to Kallidor.

The breeze rippled through the blood-red plumes on their black, visored helmets and opened their cloaks, revealing the blood-red inner linings. Shielding their eyes from the sun with their upper hands, and darting quick reptilian glances from side to side as they strode over to the exit gates, the Ysss hissed to each other in short, staccato bursts, registering their discomfort as they took in the beauty of the place.

Flowers were everywhere: lining the broad boulevards, festooned about the trellises that ran along each street, massed in complex patterns in the great gardens that bordered the houses of graceful and intricate design, growing wild on the rolling hills that surrounded the magnificient city. Their scent hung in the air lightly, wafted on each gentle breeze, each shift of the wind creating a new admixture of a thousand subtle fragrances. The effect was calculated to enhance the beauty of the city, whose appearance and perspective seemed to change with every shift of the light, to envelop it in an envelope of constantly changing aromas, a dream of perfume. The Kallidorians enhanced their lives by a meticulous attention to esthetic qualities.

But all this beauty, visual and olfactory, made the Ysss extremely uncomfortable. It was totally alien to their natures, for they were a race that gloried in the sight of ruin and devastation, to

whom the rarest perfumes were the scent of fresh-spilled blood and the acrid smoke of cities burning. Their first experience of the glories of Kallidor was as offensive to them as that of a humanoid who suddenly awoke to find himself buried to the neck in a dung heap.

Escorted to quarters made damp and shadowy as sub-surface grottos at Lord Quaarg's orders, the visitors' comfort was somewhat restored. The black-armored giants were accustomed to the climatological extremes of their barren homeworld, Sserp, a place of burning deserts and dank, dark caverns. They gathered and awaited the appearance of their acting commander-in-chief, slithering about in the semi-darkness and swapping war-stories, killers' tales of violence and destruction

And while the Ysss overlords waited, Quaarg the Destroyer lay on the floor of the Dark Emperor's lair, hissing and thrashing in the closed circuit of the Great Devourer's foul ecstasies, enwrapped in the coiling tendrils of darkness that emanated from his master's great energic mass.

Ylang-Ylang's shapeless and constantly changing form, that maelstrom of intense and corrupt energies, had lost all its awful brightness and was now as dark as the center of night. And yet that deep and oppressive blackness glowed with an eerie interior luminescence all its own. The Dark Emperor was a creature of energy, an immortal thing that once had been a Mordling, the last member of the oldest and most evil race in the known universe. But Ylang had transcended mortality. Using the superscience of its kind and its own highly refined and evil mentality, Ylang

had transformed itself into an entity of dynamic energy and irresistible powers of mind, a being that lived on the energies of other life-forms. It was known as the Great Devourer because it literally devoured hundreds of suffering slaves at each feeding . . . and sometimes, when the gluttonous thing was wracked with anxiety, it consumed thousands.

Quaarg's body was charged with Ylang's energy, and his consciousness was the screen onto which were projected his master's horrific visions of blood-lust, domination, murder and destruction. . . . Blood—flowing like rivers from the mouths of a thousand open wounds; enemies lasered into charred piles of ashes; the strained music of the wounded and dying; the lingering pleasures of protracted torture; the faces of victims, as they died; the heady feeling of power that comes from mind-rape; the virile exaltation that flooded Lord Quaarg's mind as he thrashed helplessly before his master, his being annihilated by an ecstasy both religious and sexual. The Ysss worshiped at dark altars; they worshiped Death . . . and they worshiped Ylang-Ylang.

Quaarg's telepathic screams of delight penetrated the chamber where the Ysss had gathered, freezing the reptiloids in their tracks and filling their murky souls with an exquisite longing. The gift of Ylang's murderous raptures was the summit of ambition to them, the pinnacle of dark achievement; and its fortunate recipient became more than mortal, a partaker of the power of the dark side of the Infinite.

And now Quaarg thrashed and orgasmed in the Great Devourer's shadow. That could mean only

one thing: Blorg the Devastator was dead indeed . . . He had to be, the Ysss overlords all reasoned, because Blorg would never share Ylang's great gift with any of his fellows as long as he had breath left in his body.

Blorg had slit the throat of Heth, and incinerated Aasp; and done away with many other besides. He must be dead—even though the emperor had not formally pronounced Quaarg his new steward. He had to be. . .

Haaass! Haaass! The ecstatic cries suddenly stopped. Hissing like a brood of serpents, the Ysss clustered together instinctively in the center of the great, dark chamber. A moment later, a mind-raped humanoid herald shuffled in as the doors swung open. "*My lord Quaarg*!" the herald bellowed in a voice totally devoid of expression, "*My lord Quaarg*!"

The ranks of the Ysss parted as the Destroyer strode into their midst, still glowing with the obscene luminescence of Ylang's embrace. Halting abruptly as he reached the center of the group, Quaarg looked left and right, imperiously surveying the assembled reptiloids.

Clong! Blong! Ka-Chong! The clatter of their body-armor resounded in a great din as the entire company prostrated themselves before Ylang's new favorite. *Times have changed, indeed!* Quaarg reflected, a tide of satisfication rising within him. *They all know who is master now.*

Rise, people of the serpent, he told them, causing the black ranks to billow and swell like a dark ocean at high-tide. *Now we shall discuss great things. We shall discuss how best to crush our enemies and extend the line of our con-*

quests . . . .

Rian was tickled by the Greeban turn-out in honor of Ween Leever. Having by this time seen any number of liberation and victory celebrations, the star-pirate thought that Ween's homecoming was the most joyous of all.

The Greebans went wild as the Hazard touched-down at the spaceport in Gaaro, Ween's hometown. The flexiladder rocked and the bulkheads of the good ship vibrated as the cheers and roars of Ween's people rang out to the skies, threatening at any moment (it seemed to Rian) to shift the planet in its orbit.

Crowds surrounded the starship and extended out in all directions for as far as the eye could see. At the foot of the flexiladder there stood a brightly-clad contingent of Greeban notables, headed by a bulbous figure with legs as thin as vanallium wands. This was Ween's uncle, and fellow-hero, Vax Waxnax Leever . . . the man Red Rian had almost zapped, mistaking him for one of the spies among the Greeban contingent on Yahwoo—spies who had betrayed the buccaneer to his archenemy, Blorg, thereby causing his shipwreck on Azitlin.

That little gaffe had almost cost Rian Ween's friendship. But Garthane had saved the day, and smoothed everything over. So at this moment, Rian was able to rejoice in Ween's triumph as if it had been his own. And old Vax had forgiven him readily enough, once he realized that his second-in-command had sold-out to Blorg.

The old swindler and his ascetic nephew were now the glories of their homeworld, having been jointly responsible for the probes that penetrated a

number of captive galaxies undetected to spread the League's message of freedom and resistance. And liberated Greeb itself was now one of the allies' greatest assets in the struggle against Ylang's minions; the unsurpassed tech-skills of the Greebans were invaluable to the League, and Garthane had decided to work at developing their latent powers of mind.

"*Ween Leever! Ween Leever! Ween Leever!*" the crowd chanted in one mighty voice, as the boy-genius peeped out of the bright ship's hatch. Ween's eyes went wide as flying saucers, and his jaw dropped like a flexiladder after a landing. He blushed like a one-man sunset, and his knees wobbled as if they were playing a chromaccordian. Ween, always one to retire into himself in the presence of emotional displays, was paralyzed by the enthusiasm of the crowd.

Standing beside him in the hatchway, Rian turned to his chief tech-head and said, "Go on out, laddie. They're waiting for you."

Ween's only reply was a strangled *Uuk! Uuk!* that ended sharply on a high-pitched note resembling the cluck of poultry.

"Come on, son," old Klegg rasped impatiently. "You can't keep twelve million people waiting."

Ween's second reply was the same as his first.

"*We want Ween Nerdeen*" the crowd roared. "*We want Ween Nerdeen!*"

"Come on, Weenie-boy," Rian said gently. "You're on."

Down at the foot of the flexiladder, Ween's uncle was fretting with impatience, waddling back and forth while he fingered the wide brim of his pointed hat. "Yas, yas," he muttered nervously.

"The boy's probably experiencing a slight inconvenience," he told the officials gathered around him. "Hasn't got his uncle's poise and aplomb."

"*Ween!*" Rian grunted through clenched teeth, as he grinned and waved at the crowd outside. "*Damn it–they're waiting for you!*"

Suddenly, before Ween could muster another brace of *Uuks*, a long, furry arm thrust him—gently but firmly—out of the hatch and down the flexiladder.

The crowd went wild again. Cheers rocked the Hazard. As Ween, red-faced and gasping, clutching at the ladder's railing to regain his balance, jigged down the steps, Rian turned to Purpur. "Someday, he'll thank you for that," he said, grinning like an arc-lamp. The felinoid smiled a knowing cat-smile and purred softly.

"Ah, m'boy! My dear nephew! My beloved Ween Nerdeen!" Uncle Vax said, standing at the foot of the flexiladder and grandiosly throwing open his arms in the manner of a vibro-operatic tenor.

Just then, Ween's foot caught on one of the bottom steps, sending him flying into the air in a jerky swan-dive—right down into the great convex pool of his uncle's belly! Vax's pipestem legs buckled on impact, and the Leevers—uncle and nephew—fell backward to the ground, taking three of the most important personages on Greeb with them.

Rian and Purpur ducked back inside the Hazard, and shook with suppressed laughter. The entire starship shook as the crew, out of consideration for Ween's feelings, clapped their calloused hands over their mouths and snorted like a rampage of

Karian buffalos.

The crowd cheered even louder at the unintentional buffoonery of its heroes, and surged closer to the ship, lifting Ween and Vax onto its shoulders.

Radish-red in the face, wheezing and puffing like the reactors of a tramp starsteamer, the veins on his bulbous nose standing out like tunnels circling a globe, Vax leaned over to address his nephew.

"Damn it, Ween," he said in his whiny drawl. "Next time we do anything like this again, I'll carry you down from the ship!"

"Speak up, boy!" he snarled, after Ween's incoherent reply.

Ween tried his hardest, but all he could manage was a three-out-of-three series of *Uuks*.

Then the crowd parted, and a children's marching band—all five hundred of them playing the twangy mouth-harps that so delighted the Greebans—came forward and led the heroes away.

Wa-a-aa-aaang-g-g! Phwang-g-g! Bee-de-lee-yaa-a-aaang! As the wobbly, nasal music diminished in the distance, the crowd renewed its cheers as it filed out of the spaceport behind the elevated figures of the scrawny, frizzle-haired boy and the bobbling fat man in the high, pointed hat.

Red Rian shook his head as he watched the procession disappear. "Ah-h-h," he sighed, shrugging his shoulders as he turned and walked back into the Hazard. "I can never make up my mind about that boy: Has he got two left feet . . . or two right feet?"

The whole thing was an ordeal for Ween, the kind of ordeal that shy people always dread, but rarely experience outside of their nightmares. Banquets, testimonials, award ceremonies, tributes, dedications, visits and receptions: it made his flesh crawl.

He thanked the Infinite for the presence at those ordeals of his fellow-hero, Uncle Vax. The old ham wallowed in the limelight like an Olian sow in a glut-puddle. Ween actually looked forward to the old gas-bag's speeches, because they were so long-winded that, invariably, his hosts couldn't wait for him to finish so they could terminate the ceremony and go home

But it *was* good to be reunited with his family and friends. He'd been seized with a sweet, aching longing to go home ever since he'd witnessed Dann Oryzon's return to Aquaea. And it wasn't bad coming home a hero, either. He'd never had much to do with girls before, but not it seemed that the young sweeties of Greeb were drawn to him . . . almost as if he were the center of some irresistible bio-magnetic field.

And they looked so good! Ween never realized they could look so good. He'd never looked up long enough from his workbench, his little universe of technical delights, to notice them. Of course, he was impressed with Nila . . . But then, who wasn't? She was like some enchantress straight out of a Greeban nursery tale: no man seemed immune to her charms.

I'll have to think about women, Ween promised himself, as he shuffled off to the security of the marvelous and well-furnished tech-shop his grateful people had built especially for him. *I guess I'm*

gonna have to get all the input down, and then feed it into a neuro-computer . . . so I can figure out what to do about women.

He entered the dim silence of the tech-shop, and felt safe for the first time in two weeks. After activating the lumidiscs, he sat down at his workbench and lost himself in the intricate beauty and order of the minimax self-switching omnicommunicator he'd been designing.

This was a project that had obsessed him ever since Old Bonehead (as the guys on the Hazard used to call the late Lord Blorg) shot them down outside of Azitlin's atmosphere. The comcircuits had been fused by one of the Scourge's laser-hits, and all communication with the outside universe had been cut off. So Ween was determined to create a com-system that functioned independently all over the ship.

Now he was at home (home being anywhere there was a tech-workshop) and free from the distractions of the world outside; free to return to his first love. "Now, let's see," he muttered to himself, submerging into the vast ocean of technological absorption.

"Mr. Ween." A flat, crackly voice interrupted his thoughts, and a barrel-shaped roller-robot came up the aisle where Ween sat. It was his friend and techno-companion, O-V-1, the compulsive-talking mechanoid who was his assistant onboard the Hazard.

"Mr. Ween, welcome back," O-V-1 said as it rolled toward him. "Permit me to offer my congratulations on your social triumph, and to welcome you back with all the energy in my circuits. Things have been at a standstill since your depar-

ture. It has been inordinately quiet in your absence. Further, it has been very lonely as well . . . . "

Wow, thought Ween, *how that robot can go on!* But realizing that the companion of his labors had been lonely, he slumped in his seat and let O-V-1 blabber on, occasionally nodding and grunting encouragingly. Out of affection for his mobile and devoted toolkit, he delayed the moment when he would order it to de-activate its talkie-track.

And O-V-1 would go on forever if he were not stopped, talking endlessly. Not just about technical matters, either; the robot had an obsessive interest in moral and ethical behavior, in the way both men and machines ought to conduct themselves.

"Okay, Ovie," Ween said gently, at the end of a half-hour. "It's been nice talking to you, and you know I'm really glad to see you again . . . But now, I've got to think. Right?"

"You wish me to de-activate my talkie-track?" the robot asked in a hushed crackle. Ween nodded slowly. The mechanoid *wowed* into silence and rolled off with a sad squeaking of its moving parts.

"Phew," Ween signed, turning back to the workbench and running his hands over the parts strewn on its surface like a miser caressing his hoard. "Lemme see," he soliloquized, picking up a rotator-duct, "would this go in the prime-indicator circuit or the trans-energic regulator?"

"Neither," a voice behind him said, a soft, drawling female voice whose tones suggested a mixture of honeys: dark and rich in the lower register and sweet and clear as sunlight in the upper.

Oh, no! Not another visitor! Ween thought, as he frowned with annoyance and swivelled around in his seat.

Before him stood a tall young woman with swelling hips and bosoms, and a waist as slender as an Okronian palm tree. Her eyes were luminous and dark as velvet, her skin was a deep, dark brown; her nose ran from a narrow bridge down to wide, flaring nostrils; her lips were full, and looked sensously soft; and her smile was as bright as a beacon in the dusk. Her hair was full and black and thick, and framed her face with a midnight halo. She entered the room and walked up to Ween, moving with a rippling grace that he located somewhere between those of a cat and a dancer.

"I—I—I," stammered Ween, "was j-just trying to b-be alone."

"I know," she replied sympathetically, bathing the immobilized Ween in the light of her smile and the honey of her voice. "It's the best way to attack a problem at first." Ween's eyes never left hers; she seemed to have him hypnotized. "But sometimes," she continued, "it's good to bat your ideas around with somebody else."

"Uh-h-h," Ween gasped, catching his breath and straightening up in his seat, suddenly anxious to hide his slouch. "But you wouldn't—I mean, uh, you'd probably couldn't understand. . . ." His voice trailed off as he gestured at the components on the workbench.

"Y'know, babe," she replied, tartly and sweetly at the same time, "you don't have to be Greeban to dig techno-stuff."

Ween just gulped and got red in the face.

"Try me," she told him.

Ween narrowed his wide eyes. *I'll get rid of this sassy female in two blips,* he thought, deciding to test her in earnest. "G-Give me the related components for e-each of the following," he stammered, leaning back in his seat to watch her carefully.

"Dexton points," he barked.

"Reo-clasps," she cooed.

"Nallax condensers," he spat.

"R-O-4 feeds," she lilted.

"Tenalex generators," he growled.

"Arcolite housings," she murmured.

"B-2 flexors," he snapped.

"O-O-O tensors," she trilled.

Ween's eyes widened with each successive reply, and his jaw (apparently wired-into the same sequence) dropped accordingly. *Wow!* he thought, still mesmerized by this unusual woman. *Half the techies I know would have to research those questions!*

Her eyes and smile gleamed in the dark surroundings of her face as she looked at him. "I've been pokin' around here for the last couple of days," she told him. "And I'd like to talk to you about your idea for a minimax self-switching omni-communicator."

Ween couldn't believe his ears. "You would?" he asked weakly, gazing deep into her beautiful eyes.

"I sure would, honey," she replied. "Techstuff's my thing. I love it."

Ween got to his feet like a robot shorting-out, and staggered down the aisle. A moment later, he returned with another stool. *What an interesting person,* he kept saying to himself over and over.

"Yes," he said, gesturing for her to sit beside him on the second stool. "Yes, yes, yes!" She sat down and snuggled up beside him with that rich, dark grace of hers. Then she turned to face him, flashing her bright eyes and smile.

"W-Where are you from?" Ween gasped.

"I'm from Umolo, in the Ogonda system of Phorbos," she replied, the tones of her voice reminding him of a musical instrument.

"Yah. Yah. Sure." Ween said, his palms growing cold and sweaty. He wiped them surreptitiously on his coveralls. "And w-what's your . . . name?"

She locked him into the hypo-beams of her dark eyes and replied softly, "My name is Oruna. . . ."

CHAPTER TWO

Born Again, Born Immortal

Ylang-Ylang, the Great Devourer, immortal mass of corrupt energies and incalculable power, thundered fitfully in its new lair, sending forth showers of flame and billows of dark, reeking smoke like a god in a volcano. The past two years had provided it with more excitement and cause for anxiety than it had known in millennia. The spectre of cosmic boredom that haunted the Dark Emperor for aeons had at last been exorcised by the march of recent events; the great galactic game of power and domination had become a matter of life and death.

For the first time since Ylang had transformed itself from a Mordling into its present and god-like incarnation, the star-tyrant knew pain. It remembered vividly the awful stabs and jolts that wracked it to the core when the League of Free Worlds bombarded Flaigon and the Fellowship of Light concentrated its collective powers of mind in an effort to destroy its incorporeal archenemy.

Only two hundred minds! the Devourer fumed.

Two hundred minds of two hundred old monkeys: but they hurt me, and caused me to suffer! Not to mention the great humiliation and mental anguish of having my homeworld–my court, and the seat of my power–blown out from under me! They will all pay dearly for this . . . galaxies shall run red with blood!

BOOM! VR-R-RROOOM! BUH-BOO-OOOM! The Devourer's mass churned and exploded at a thousand points on its periphery, causing all the Ysss, all the technicians, all the soldiers and all the slaves in the vast hall and the sprawling complex of buildings that surrounded it, to fall to the ground and cower.

And Garthane–that vile old monkey, that presumptuous humanoid lump of excrement–has been recruiting: soon there will be more minds to threaten me, more of these horrid little creatures after my life! The Lord of Life and Death was frightened and angry . . . and frustrated.

O these Kallidorians! I offer them the ultimate gift–immortality–and all they do is jabber and babble among themselves, conferring endlessly while the tapestry of my empire unravels daily . . . . What are they waiting for? Ylang's outer fires fizzled out in great steaming gusts. The staff in the lair raised their heads, looked around for a moment, and then timidly got to their feet.

And those probes, Ylang thought darkly, simmering in its own cyclonic juices, *those filthy little missiles that violate the skies of the subject worlds, spreading the League's incitement to rebellion. Before Blorg's Greeban agents could tell him how to counteract the things, that meddling Garthane annihilated them. Garthane again!. . .*

I'll have his miserable life if it's the last thing I ever do! The Devourer was in a black mood.

Quaarg, come before me! Ylang commanded, its thoughts breaking into the consciousness of its minions with the force of a polar storm. *It is high time I had some distraction,* the Dark Emperor thought privately.

Rooted out of the friendly gardens of Kallidor like a black, malignant weed, Quaarg scuttled into the lair with a burst of frantic activity.

"My lord Quaarg!" the mind-raped herald roared tonelessly, as the huge doors swung open. Then he turned, and stepped directly into the path of the on-rushing reptiloid. *Wump!* Quaarg flattened the man and then tripped over his body, hitting the polished floor in a six-limbed sprawl and sliding into the lair for a distance of twenty feet.

Stupid humanoid lump! Quaarg exclaimed as he scrambled to his feet. The lair rang with his master's unholy laughter.

Ah, my hissing little beauties do brighten their poor father's grim exile, Ylang remarked, his chuckles going up in *poofs* of fire and vapor. Quaarg shielded his eyes and approached the Lord of Life and Death, prostrating himself when he had come as close to the rippling mass of thunderous energy as he dared. *Rise and go to the far end of the lair,* the Devourer's thought-voice urged in sonorous organ-tones, *and I will show you a wonder.*

Quaarg did as his master ordered. As he drew near to the other side of the vast hall, the group of technicians there parted respectfully and bowed low before him. Behind them he saw an operating table surrounded on three sides by banks of com-

plex machinery. On the table, covered by a long polymesh sheet, lay a massive and inert form.

Approach the table, sweet Quaarg, Ylang cooed, *and remove the covering. I have a little surprise for you.*

The Dark Emperor's little surprises were rarely cause for rejoicing; Quaarg's scales stiffened as he reached out and took hold of the sheet.

What has my lord prepared for his servant? the reptiloid asked, unable to mask his anxiety.

Something you least expect, my darling, the emperor replied sweetly, banking his fires low in anticipation, as mortals might hold their breath. *Draw the sheet, my child.*

Slowly, with trembling hands, Quaarg pulled the covering off the form on the operating table. *Haaa-aa-aaass!* He gasped and stepped backwards, involuntarily recoiling at the sight of the bizarre and monstrous form that lay before him.

And what does my little snakelet think of his father's surprise?

Quaarg's lidless eyes widened, his pupils dilated to their outermost limits as he peered through the gloom of the lair and stared at the incredible thing Ylang had made. *It is truly fearsome, Father Ylang,* he replied in a small thought-voice. *It is terrible to look upon.*

Thunder crashed and lightning flashed with stroboscopic intensity as the emperor's mirth solarized the lair. *Ask me what it is, sweet Quaarg,* the tyrant demanded coyly.

Father Ylang, Quaarg began haltingly, unable to take his eyes off the thing on the table, *what . . . is . . . it?*

The lair rocked as Ylang's sinister laughter wel-

led up, accompanied by a firestorm that bathed the chamber—and the thing on the table—in its baleful light. And when he heard the star-tyrant's reply, Quaarg's knees buckled, and he tottered backwards in an attempt to regain his balance.

It is an old acquaintance of yours, Ylang boomed, shaking the walls with its filthy glee, *an old friend . . . .*

"Peace and prosperity to the people of Greeb," the High Master of the Fellowship of Light said as he blessed his hosts. And after Garthane and his second-in-command, Brother Camenarpo, descended the flexiladder of their starship, two hundred purple-cowled figures followed them. He had brought the Fellowship's "old guard" to Greeb with him.

Garthane had been much impressed by the latent powers of mind possessed by Ween's people. He had discussed this with the members of his order, who then voted to develop the mental abilities of the Greebans, seeing them as a force for good in the struggle against Ylang's unspeakable evil. The Greebans, in their turn, had readily accepted the Fellowship's offer, thanks largely to the efforts of their two intergalactic heroes, Ween (who knew and respected Garthane) and Vax (whose life the warrior-mystic had recently saved).

Greeban brains and technical know-how had already contributed much in the fight against the forces of the Dark Empire, and Garthane felt that Greeban powers of mind would aid the allies even further. The planet was a happy place, in the aftermath of Ween's triumphal homecoming, and the Fellowship, as well as Rian and his crew—the

heroes of Primula, Taylos and Havanal—were more than welcome.

Their pleasure was further magnified when Dann came in from Morvida, accompanied by Altektu, D-Anacom and Valennia. And to top everything off, Nila and Commander Ozain, the League's chief, came in four hours later from Aurea Solis, the center of allied resistance. It was a grand reunion for each and every one of them, for they had all met and come together in the quest for intergalactic freedom, the great adventure of their time . . . and it was not over yet.

Garthane and the members of the Fellowship worked constantly with the Greeban volunteers. Red Rian and his crew discussed intergalactic strategy with Commander Ozain and his staff. Altektu and D-Anacom discussed psychotherapeutic techniques with the League's healers, and the rights of mechanoids with its statesmen. Nila continued her brilliant liaison work for the League, and found time to become fast friends with Valennia.

Whenever Nila and Val would get together, their conversation always turned to Dann Oryzon. One day, while they were talking, Nila was startled by something she had overlooked earlier in her new friendship. She realized that Valennia, Dann's close friend and companion, was in love with him. *What a complicated equation love is,* Nila thought. *So many variables* . . . .

At the end of their first week on Greeb, the visitors had a pleasant surprise. Ween Leever, that shy loner and technological ascetic, threw a lavish party for all his friends. Of course, it *was* held in his spanking-new tech-shop. (Rian took

this to be a reassuring sign that "the kid" hadn't changed too drastically.) But the pleasant surprise wasn't even the delightful party that Ween had painstakingly engineered. No, the real surprise was meeting the "very interesting person" that Ween had been jabbering about all week . . . his fellow-tech-head, the dark and lovely Oruna.

Ween beamed all through the introductions, and his smile couldn't have been wider if he'd stretched his mouth with his fingers. Oruna charmed them all—man, woman, felinoid and android. Only O-V-1 seemed adversely affected by the sultry and sassy young woman from Umolo; its performance was erratic whenever she was near Ween and—wonder of wonders!—it left its talkie-track inactive for the duration of the party.

They all noticed the roller-robot's strange conduct, but it took those two behavioral specialists, the loving androids Altektu and D-Anacom, to figure out what was wrong . . . . O-V-1 was jealous of Oruna's place in Ween's affections.

"She *is* a sweetie!" Red Rian enthused, pinning Ween to the wall with a muscular display of confidentiality. "Listen, laddie," the star-pirate stage-whispered, as his young shipmate went red in the face and darted bird-like glances around the room to reassure himself that no one was watching them. "Now that you'll be doing some courting of your own," his skipper informed him, poking a sausage of a finger in the boy's narrow chest, "I'm gonna give you the benefit of an experienced older man's counsel . . . . "

After Rian, it was Dann's turn. "Y'know, Ween," he told his contemporary thoughtfully, "I've given male-female relationships a lot of seri-

ous thought lately, and I'd like to make a couple of suggestions . . . . If you don't mind?'' Ween just gurgled and flushed and nodded, helpless in the grip of embarrassment . . . .

A short while after Dann had finished, old Klegg sat him down for a long talk. He was the oldest of the Taylian pirates, and he took a grandfatherly interest in the young Greeban's doings. ''How old are you, boy?'' he asked. ''By Zel,'' he said, after Ween had managed to stammer a reply, ''that's not old at all. Still, it's time someone had a little talk with you . . . about the avians and the apians.'' Ween just nodded his head and gave the old pirate a sickly smile . . . .

Nila drifted by a while later, gave him a peck on the cheek, and led him off to the far end of the workshop. ''I'm overjoyed at your good fortune, Ween,'' she said in her courteous way. ''Oruna's very lovely. I really like her.'' Ween blushed and gagged and tried to smile. ''If you don't mind,'' Nila went on sweetly, ''perhaps I could give you a woman's point-of-view on the subject of meaningful relationships?'' Ween didn't mind. He was past minding. He was paralyzed . . . .

All Purpur did was to pad up beside Ween when the latter was drinking a glass of fiery nenegol to steady his shorted-out nerves. The cat-man purred like the rumble of an approaching earthquake, clapped Ween on the back (causing him to spray four guests with nenegol), and handed him a small edalite envelope. When the boy-genius opened the envelope, he saw that it contained several sheets of electro-copy, on which were statotyped the mating proverbs of the cat-folk of Yahwoo (which Purpur had made Red Rian stay up all night to

translate into standard intergalactic-speak). Ween took a quick swig of nenegol to brace himself, opened his mouth to thank his shipmate, and choked on his drink.

The soft machines, Altektu and D-Anacom, offered their congratulations and discreetly counseled him on the dynamics of interpersonal relationships. They bowed politely to him from across the table when they had concluded their little talk. Ween bowed back to them, the after-effects of the potent nenegol causing him to overdo it, and bonked his head on the edge of the table . . . .

And finally, there was Garthane. The High Master spoke, it seemed to Ween, in a high language of poetry and parable. He spoke of the force that animates the flesh, and the merging of bodies that leads to the union of souls; of the inherent beauty of male and female, and the possibilities of joint participation in the workings of the dark heart of the Infinite. Ween was moved and impressed. And not at all sure he had understood the whole thing . . . .

And when the party was over at last, and all the guests had departed, Ween and Oruna faced each other in the center of the workshop as the lumidiscs dimmed out slowly, one-by-one.

''What's the matter, honey?'' she asked, when she saw the expression of utter bewilderment on his face.

''Oh, Oruna,'' Ween said plaintively, lowering his eyes and shuffling his feet. ''Everybody means well—I know that. But . . . . '' He paused and shook his head.

''Yes, Ween?'' she encouraged softly.

''Well, they've, uh . . . they've all been giving

me advice—about us, I mean." He looked at her shyly for a moment, and then lowered his eyes again. "A-And it's all good advice, I'm sure. But so much of it is . . . different, contradictory . . . that I . . . . " His voice trailed off until it was indistinct.

"They're all different, Ween. Right? So they all see things their own way."

Ween looked up as he felt her fingers gently stroking his hair. "Y-Yah. Sure. I know *that,*" he said lamely, groping for his next words. "But I can't compute it all . . . . I just don't know what to do now."

He felt her presence at his side, warm and sweet as a tropical night. "You've got to do what you feel, as well as what you think, child," she told him.

"Well . . . what does that mean?" he asked in a whisper.

"It means you think too much, Ween Leever," Oruna replied. "Just put your arms around me and give me a kiss . . . . "

Awaken, and be restored to life! the Dark Emperor boomed, the midnight music of its thoughts rising in a symphonic crescendo of corrupt power and vile, seductive beauty.

As beams of energy flashed from the machines that surrounded it, lancing out and entering its massive frame in vivid, animating bursts, the thing on the operating table opened its eyes.

And strength flowed through its body: waves of incredible vitality, coursing through all the channels of its material being, blasts and pulses that vibrated to the dark and demented music of Mordl-

ing superscience, Mordling evil. The thing on the operating table had come forth into the light of life, delivered from the dark ocean of oblivion.

Awaken! the emperor commanded, its thoughts rising like the wind that heralds the end of worlds. *Take your place among the living!*

Quaarg trembled with awe as the huge, gleaming form sat up suddenly, causing the assembled Ysss high command to step back in alarm and hiss like a den of panicked vipers.

Alive! the great menacing thing cried out with the voice of its thoughts. *Alive! Alive!*

The Dark Emperor's mass flared and roared in a visual display of its deep delight as the thing swivelled around on the operating table and lowered its feet to the ground.

And the Ysss, who are known to fear nothing in this life but their immortal master, suddenly began to cringe under the buffets of wild energy and fierce vitality that seemed to emanate from the thing Ylang had created. They hissed in a great chorus as their scales tightened and their bodies tensed; their reptilian flesh began to crawl as they realized that here was something else they would always fear.

The thing planted its feet on the ground, flexed its limbs and looked around the lair slowly. When it caught sight of the Great Devourer, it flung open its four arms and looked full upon the tyrant's blinding and furiously churning energies . . . without shielding its eyes! Then, as it tottered unsteadily toward the Lord of Life and Death, all the Ysss fell to the ground and covered their own eyes.

Alive! Alive! the thing exulted, its telepathic

screams chilling the blood of the prostrate reptiloids. *I have been delivered from the jaws of Death!*

The creature gained confidence with each step, and soon began to move with a grace and power that were more than mortal. It looked upon its creator, and saw the Great Devourer fully for the first time—something that no servant of Ylang-Ylang had ever been able to do before!

I see you, Father Ylang! it cried, the power of its thoughts flooding the lair. *I see you as I have never seen you before–in all your terrible beauty and unspeakable glory!. . . I live! I live!*

Yes-s-s, yes-s-s, the Devourer hissed, the winds of its thoughts rising in expectation. *Do you know who you are–who you were, my child?*

I do, great Ylang, the thing answered. *I know everything. All that I was has come back with me out of the darkness.*

And who are you, my darling?

I am Blorg the Devastator, steward of the Dark Empire and lord of all the Ysss.

Haaa-aaass! Quaarg looked up when he heard those words that rang in his mind like a sentence of death. Slowly, inch by inch, he began to back away in the direction of the lair's great doors.

You are indeed, my sweet Blorg, the Dark Emperor replied joyfully. *You are that, and much more. You are greater than before. You are born again, born immortal!*

I live again . . . and I live again to serve you, great Ylang. I live to spread your gospel of fire and the sword, to purge the stars of your enemies, to sow the fiery seeds of carnage and devastation wherever there is the slightest resistance. The

stars shall be bathed in the blood of your enemies–I pledge my life on it!

YAA-HAA-HAA-HAAAA-HAHAAA! The floor of the lair heaved and bucked, the walls bent and groaned, and the Ysss cowered and wept through ductless eyes, as the Great Devourer laughed its insane, consuming laughter . . . .

Red Rian and Dann Oryzon beamed across the table at Nila as she raised her glass in a toast. "Gentlemen," she said, her bright smile dimming out as she stared at them thoughtfully. "Dann. Rian. You are the two men dearest to my heart in all the living universe . . . you know that." They both nodded, their smiles ebbing under the pull of her sudden gravity.

"I've finally made up my mind," she said with a small sigh. "And tomorrow, I'll show you both the path my heart has led me to take."

Dann gulped and looked down at his plate. Rian sat bolt-upright in his seat, his face an impassive mask, his blue eyes scanning Nila's face.

"But tonight, I want us to make a toast, a pledge to life—to the Infinite." She rose from her chair and held her glass aloft. The two men promptly did the same.

"To our friendship," Nila whispered in a husky voice. "Wherever we may be, wherever our lives should lead us . . . may our friendship be as strong and unbroken as it is this moment. May it endure to the end of our lives . . . and beyond."

"To our friendship," the men seconded, as they all clinked their glasses together. After that, they drank and stared at each other for a moment, and then sat down in silence.

It's come at last, Dann Oryzon thought. *Tomorrow marks the start of a new life . . . for all of us. And I swear with all my being to abide by Nila's decision.*

"Infinity is at the heart of all things," Dann said, looking from Nila to Rian as he uttered part of the Fellowship's ritual formula and greeting.

"All things are one," they replied, supplying the missing part. Then they grew silent again.

Oh, Zel! the star-pirate thought. *The end of a long, hard road. This is it. This is the main event . . . . Accept whatever happens, you old star-hopper. And give them both your blessing . . . no matter how it goes.*

"Well," he said, his bright baritone huskier than usual, "after tomorrow morning, all we'll have to worry about will be how to finish off the Dark Empire."

Dann nodded his head and laughed nervously. Nila smiled her bright smile at the star-pirate . . . and he thought he detected in it just the slightest tinge of regret.

"Yes," murmured Nila, thinking about how much they'd all been through together in the last few years. "Tomorrow marks a new beginning . . . ."

CHAPTER THREE

Nila Makes Her Decision

Haaass! Quaarg scuttled down the garden path, darting nervous glances left and right as he went, feeling, for the first time, more secure in the open, sunlit gardens of Kallidor than in the close and murky halls of Ylang's new residence.

He had beaten a hasty retreat from the lair while that dreadful thing was still exulting over its resurrection. Consistent with its hideous sense of humor, the Dark Emperor had certainly surprised him, all right. The mechanoid horror it had created was not just a supermachine, not just another one of the emperor's many sinister toys; no, it was Blorg himself!

Or Blorg's brain, anyway: all that was salvageable after his last encounter with the star-pirate, Red Rian. But that was enough. *Blorg was back!*

That explains why Ylang never proclaimed me lord of all the Ysss, Quaarg realized bitterly. *Because Blorg was not dead. The Devourer kept his brain alive until it was housed in that great pile of*

junk–that fearsome technological perversion'

Has the Devourer elevated me above all others just to make me the butt of an unspeakable joke? Quaarg asked himself, as he disappeared from sight in a bed of long-stemmed Sunwatchers. *No! I can't believe that was its sole intent and purpose. I need time to think, to plot . . . .*

Meanwhile, inside the lair, the more-than-mortal, more-than-mechanoid thing that was the reborn Blorg the Devastator discovered its powers and extended the range of its senses, as it began to adapt its mind to its new body.

Ylang had ordered a great mirror brought into the lair, and Blorg stood before it, gazing in wonder at his new form.

He began to understand why even the people of the serpent had cringed before him: he was terrible, indeed. His form radiated power and menace, and its sinister perfection seemed to proclaim to all who looked upon it that here was a consummation of evil and technology: the marriage of malice and the machine.

The great quartzite hemispheres of his eyes glowed with points of high-intensity light that diffracted from each of their many facets: malevolent, insect-eyes that could also be focused into piercing beams that penetrated the darkness. His face had the planes and grim austerity of a skull, an animated and unmistakable death's head, its features suggesting not only the reptiloid, but the image of death of all creatures. His cranium was studded with a number of gleaming nodes, a crown of sensors and scanners that extended his senses infinitely, lending them the sonar, radar and infra-red eyes and ears of technology.

The great silver form gleamed luridly in the murk of the lair with its own malevolent glow, as it stood erect at a full height of over eight feet. Blorg's massive body—all metal and omni-resistant plastic—was as powerful and coldly beautiful as a new starship. His every movement sang with a smooth and silent hydraulic perfection.

He had two legs and four arms, as before. His body was a tireless engine of destruction, powered by its own internal reactor of near-inexhaustible power; hunger and fatigue, doubt and confusion, were states he would never experence again. And his mind was shielded by his creator; no one could gain access to his thoughts: not the Fellowship of Light, not the Kallidorians . . . only Ylang knew the channel to Blorg's mind.

While his limbs were veritable beams and pile-drivers, his fingers were tools and weapons: cutting torches and compact laser-cannon. Blorg was the demon of the machine, the unstoppable engine of destruction.

Are you pleased that I have made you thus? the Dark Emperor asked when Blorg turned away from the mirror.

Only my father knows how pleased, Blorg told his lord and master. *I am as beautiful as Death himself.*

And nearly as eternal, the tyrant purred. *With an occasional refueling of your reactor, you might outlive the stars.*

Great Ylang has done much for his unworthy servant, Blorg told his lord humbly, prostrating himself as he did. *And I shall serve my master as perfectly as it is in my power to do . . . But may I*

ask one small thing of the Lord of Life and Death?

And what is that "one small thing," my son?

Your permission . . . to rend Quaarg limb from limb, to paint the halls with his blood and stomp his guts to dust!

Ylang rumbled fitfully for a moment. *No, my son, that is not possible. While you are now immortal, yet do I still have need of a mortal emissary to handle some of the details of my plans. Of course, you will have him one day. But not now.*

And he shares my father's embrace? Blorg asked jealously.

Not in any manner resembling the way you shall, sweet Blorg, the Devourer cooed, as the midnight tendrils of ecstasy streamed out from its darkening mass and began to coil around his steward's gleaming form.

Blorg threw open his mouth and screamed his delight in great honking blasts.

What you felt before will be as nothing to what you shall experience now, the Great Devourer purred, flickering into darkness . . . .

On the morning of the day after Nila and her two suitors had pledged their eternal friendship, the lady from the golden planet summoned both men to her quarters, one at a time, and spoke the name of the one she had chosen for her lover.

Oh, stellar turmoil and galactic uproar, Red Rian thought as he walked over to Nila's quarters with uncertain steps. The star-pirate was in agony: he had not slept at all the night before, spending the long and obstinate hours between midnight and morning pacing his room and staring out at the star-fields that surrounded Greeb.

For the first time in many years, the man who feared nothing—neither Blorg nor Ylang, not death itself—felt afraid. He was afraid of losing Nila, afraid she would finally reject him . . . afraid that the promise of her love was drifting forever out of his reach.

The Infinite knows she's got reason enought to choose Dann Oryzon, he thought, slumping as he entered Nila's building. *The lad's bright, courageous, sincere as they come, sensitive, attentive . . . spiritual, too–damn it! And solid as hell. She's got to choose Dann. It doesn't seem like such a hard choice to me between settling down to a nice secure life or riding the tail of a comet.*

Rian shook his head as he shuffled down the hall that led to Nila's apartments. *And just look at me: a beat-up old starhawk who's pushing forty . . . a wanderlusting madman whose front door is a hatch, whose front lawn is whatever galaxy he happens to be passing through. Nope, it doesn't look good. Well, let's get it over with . . . .*

"Nila," he called out in a strangled voice as the door *whooshed* open. "It's me, Red Rian. I'm uh . . . here." He stood in the doorway, looking as if he wanted desperately to be anywhere else, until Nila appeared and motioned for him to follow her into the living room.

After they had entered the living room, Nila handed him a drink and gestured for him to sit down across the room from her. Her expression was grave as she faced him, and there was pain in her eyes. It was a moment before she could bring herself to speak. Rian took advantage of this pause by draining the glass he held in his sweaty hand. He didn't even notice what he was drinking. Then

he just leaned forward in his chair, staring at Nila intently, not even daring to think as he waited for her to say something . . . anything.

"Rian," she said, her voice low and husky, as if she'd been crying only a short while before he came, "you don't know this, but I had Dann Oryzon come over here before you. . . ."

That's it, he thought, his uncertain smile stiffening into a grimace of pain as his mind filled with the vivid image of a bright starship going down in flames. He took a deep, trembling breath. *You're out, buster,* he told himself. *The party's over. Well, get up, you gink–there's nothing to be afraid of any more. Get up and take it like a man.*

"Ahh-h-h-h," he wheezed, as if his heart had just left his body through his lungs. He got to his feet and tottered unsteadily over to where Nila was seated. "Right. Right. I've got the transmission," he mumbled nobly, lowering his eyes as she stood up to face him. "You can spare me the details," he went on in a voice as faint and lonely as a signal from the other end of the universe. "I've known it all along."

His face was almost as red as his hair and beard now, and he couldn't have met her eyes if his life depended upon it. Nila was silent; the room was as quiet as the grave. This made his flesh crawl; and so he spoke again, just to break the unbearable silence that had come between them.

"I'm . . . happy . . . for you two," he said with the voice of an old man on his death-bed. "I understand."

"You understand, do you?" Nila said, as she placed her hands on his arms and squeezed them with a sudden and urgent pressure. Slowly, like a

condemned man taking his first look at the executioner, Rian raised his eyes.

"You don't understand a thing, you big deck-ape!" she whispered intensely.

When Rian looked up, he saw tears in her eyes . . . and a smile on her lips. "My pain was for Dann, you conceited glot!" she told him. "You're the one I want, though only the Infinite knows why!

"*Hu-uuh*!" he grunted, as the hinges of his jaw popped open. "Let me get this straight," he said, his baritone soaring upward into the tenor range. "You *didn't* pick the lad? You picked *me*?"

"You're the only one left," Nila replied, shaking her head slowly.

"You picked me," the buccaneer muttered, shaking his own head and grinning his disarming grin. "Boy, you never know, do you?"

Nila was about to answer him when the star-pirate drew her close and covered her mouth with his own. They remained that way for a long time, their bodies fused together, pouring out all the longing and tenderness they had come to feel for each other over the last two-and-a-half years into that one incredible kiss.

Finally their lips parted, and they stood embracing each other in silence, speaking only with their eyes.

"Well," Rian said, when he was able to speak with his voice again, "what happens now?"

Nila looked up at him, gazing into his eyes as if she were in the process of deciphering the code that held the secrets of his soul. "The custom of my people is to first live with your chosen lover for a year or two," she answered, never taking her

eyes from his.

"You mean we *still* need a trial period?"

"We also have a proverb, Rian: '*Fools rush in where androids fear to tread.*' "

"Hmmm," he rumbled, hugging her tightly. "It's a cinch I'm not hooking up with a gambler."

"Quite the contrary, Captain," she said in a grave voice. "Taking you as my lover is the biggest gamble I can imagine."

"Well," he signed, stung by this, "I suppose that's one way of looking at it."

"Oh yes, Captain," she added teasingly. "The biggest gamble's yet to come. We've got to see whether we're suited to each other. In so many ways, the game is just beginning."

Rian smelled the fragrance of her golden hair as he bent over and nuzzled her neck. "When does the game begin?" he murmured.

"After dinner. I'd like you to come back. I've got a little crying to do before then."

He looked into her eyes and smiled gently, understanding the way she felt about Dann. "Sure," he said. "Should I bring something to drink?"

Nila winced as she thought about nenegol and the skipper of the Hazard's fondness for it. "I don't think intoxicants will be necessary."

"No," he said, still gazing into her ocean-grey eyes, "neither do I."

"Besides," she added, "I've been meaning to speak to you about your drinking, anyway."

"Trying to change me already, hah?" he asked, grinning wickedly. "I can see this isn't going to be easy."

"Things worthwhile rarely are," she told him, just before she drew him to her and kissed him.

Dann Oryzon sat in his bedroom, all alone, staring out the window into the twilight of Greeb. He'd been sitting there all day, ever since he returned from Nila's quarters after hearing her decision. And he was desolate, wounded to the core of his being, as the full meaning of what she had told him permeated his consciousness and shrouded his soul in despair.

He was still sitting there when his father entered the room an hour later. Nila had spoken with Garthane that morning, before she saw either Dann or Rian, and the High Master had finally come to comfort his son. He'd let him alone all day, because he knew that Dann first had to assimilate the experience fully before he would be capable of reflecting on it.

"Love can be pain as well as sweetness," Garthane said, sitting down on the bed beside his son. "That is the darker part of the mixed blessing of higher consciousness, Dann. But this hurt shall also contribute to the growth of your soul, by extending the scope and range of your feelings. It has left its indelible mark on your life; but that scar is also the emblem of what you have acquired through your pain: the knowledge of the deep and initimate love male and female may have for each other."

"It hurts, Garthane," Dann muttered. "More than anything I've ever felt in my life."

"Yes. I know, son," the High Master replied, placing his hand on the young man's shoulder. "That terrible pain is the price of beauty. All good things have their cost; that is the nature of the Infinite. But the pain will pass, be assured of that.

Time consumes, but it heals as well."

"That's a hard thing to accept, right now," Dann said, looking up at his father. His face was a mask of suffering, and his eyes mirrored the pain in his heart.

"Don't despair," the High Master said gently. "Nila loves you very much. You will always be in her heart. Remember, you have gained the love of a friend, and that is worth as much as the love of a lover."

Dann tried to smile as he looked into his father's compassionate eyes. "I know that, Garthane. I still have the gift of her friendship."

"Don't let this disappointment harden your heart," Garthane told him. "You must always keep yourself open to life, in order that you may love again."

Dann shook his head. "I don't think I'll ever be able to love again."

"You will, if your heart stays open. Let your suffering run its course; it will pass like a fever. But don't cover your feelings with the armor of cynicism and indifference. Let your vulnerability be your strength: that paradox is one of the great secrets of life. And life is growth and change . . . and acceptance of its nature is the mark of the wise."

Dann signed heavily. "I'll try," he murmured.

The High Master smiled at his son. "I know you will. And this shall pass, I promise you. Now, come inside. I've brought your dinner. I have important things to discuss with you."

"What things, Garthane?" Dann asked, standing up and turning his back on the darkness.

"Great things. I want you to go back to Palos

with Camenarpo, with the Greeban volunteers. I want you to prepare these new ones for initiation, and also to work closely with our other new members. We must do all we can to be ready for our next encounter with Ylang-Ylang."

Dann nodded. "I'd like that. I'd like to return to Primula."

"I spoke to your friend, Valennia," Garthane said as they left the bedroom. "She would like to accompany you to Palos."

"Why would she want to do that?" Dann asked, a puzzled expression on his face.

"She has her reasons," the High Master replied cryptically.

"Well, here I am!" Red Rian exclaimed, as the door to Nila's quarters *whooshed* open. "Let the game begin!"

When Nila appeared in the hall, a vision of beauty in a clinging, diaphanous nightgown, the star-pirate's knees turned to jelly. And when they embraced, the warmth of her body melted his heart. They kissed as if they had just invented kissing, and then drew back to gaze into each other's eyes, their looks speaking volumes of tenderness and desire.

"Life *is* a game for you, isn't it, Rian," she murmured, suddenly breaking the long silence.

"Oh, yeah," he answered. "Every breath, every move, is a gamble. And the stakes are always high."

"And what are the stakes, Captain?" she asked in a whisper.

"The life of the spirit and the welfare of the soul."

"Is it all that important, then?"

"Only to us, my dove," he said, his grin flashing in the semi-darkness of the room. "Only to us. We're just tiny, insignificant droplets in the great ocean of eternity. I know that. But we can shine with the light of the stars and gleam with the beauty of the sun . . . if we choose."

"Is that what we are?"

"Yup. Everything and nothing . . . more or less."

Her laughter cascaded through the air like a clear mountain-stream leaping in the sunlight. "You're a bold, imaginative bastard," she said after the echo of her laughter had merged with the sounds of the night outside. "And that's why I love you."

He beamed like the bow-lights of the Hazard and said nothing, as she led him into her bedroom. *You found love twice in your life, you grizzled old star-bum,* he reflected. *How, by the bells of Zel, did a clown like you ever manage that?*

"You're unusually quiet," Nila said as they stood at the side of her wide and inviting bed.

"Just the effects of awe and wonder," he said casually, drawing her to him. "And an unaccustomed attack of humility. I still can't believe it."

"Believe it," she told him. "It's real. You're here, I'm here, and the night's about to give us its blessing."

"Well," the star-pirate sighed, "there's only one thing I can give you, lady: a tough old heart that's been in the deep-freeze for years, until you thawed it out. I'd like to lay it at your feet."

"Don't put it there, I'd only step on it," she murmured, drawing the skipper of the Hazard

down on the bed with her. "Put it next to mine."

"I've got to ask you one thing," he whispered earnestly as she stroked his red beard and kissed his eyelids with infinite tenderness.

"What?" she asked in a small voice, as she popped open the pressure-buttons on his shirt, one-by-one.

"Do you always kiss on the first date?"

"Only if I like the guy I'm with," she replied, grabbing his beard with both hands and drawing his mouth down to hers. "Any more questions?"

"Yeah," he grunted. "But I think I'll save 'em for later."

"Kiss me, you clown."

And he did. It seemed to Rian that the night blazed with the intensity of their long and passionate lovemaking. The hours flashed by like a train of comets, each one bearing its precious freight of desire and tenderness, as the lovers filled the skies of their own private universe with the music of their delight and the bright atoms of their affection.

Rian and Nila made love better than either of them had expected, merging themselves in an inspired commingling of vigor softened by tenderness, of energy equalled by delicacy, of instinct tempered by intelligence. It seemed to Nila that they were making love like a pair of primordial gods, locked in that first union out of whose sublime energies there would issue the creation of worlds.

And morning, as it always does after lovers' first intense experience of each other, came much too soon. As the sun of Greeb poked its first tentative rays through the bedroom windows, Rian rested his head on his elbow and contemplated the beauty

of his lover.

Nila opened her eyes just as he was doing this, and when she saw him she smiled with a glory that held its own with the dawn. "I'm happy, Rian," she said simply, in a voice still vibrant with the memory of the night. "Happier than I've ever been. Thank you."

The star-pirate's smile was warmer than she'd ever seen it. "You've thanked me already," he said in a husky voice, as he stroked her cheek with a big, trembling hand.

And galaxies away from the lovers, but at the same time that Nila and Red Rian thanked their lives for the night's great gift, Blorg the Devastator made his plans in a mind as dark as a night without stars.

Nothing can stop me now, he thought, stomping through the corridors that led away from the Devourer's lair with a booming clank of metal feet calculated to trouble the dreams of the Ysss as they slept in their thermo-couches.

Ylang has restored me to life, and I shall repay my master by crushing the rebellions and destroying his enemies. The Ysss tossed restlessly in their coffin-like beds as he passed, the thud of his footfalls converting their slumber into an ocean of nameless dread. They thrashed and hissed like snakelets trapped in a circle of flame. And as the Devastator passed by outside their chambers, their dreams turned into nightmares.

I will deal with Quaarg as he deserves later, Blorg thought, *when Father Ylang has no further need of his services. I can wait. I have all eternity before me. It will not be long . . . .*

As Blorg approached the doors that opened out onto the surface of Kallidor, the insectoid guards stationed there fell to the ground and chittered in fear.

Let Ylang use the Kallidorians as its instrument to neutralize and punish the Fellowship of Light, and humiliate that old fool, Garthane. I will take care of the others . . . all of them.

Blorg's mind summoned up the images of his old enemies. *Dann Oryzon: the bold little one from Aquaea who tried to stop me from killing Callix, father of Nila . . . Nila, the humanoid female who dared to oppose the Dark Empire . . . That scummy rabble of Taylian pirates who man the Hazard . . . Ween Leever: that scrawny boy whose genius is the seal on his death-warrant . . . Purpur: the cat-thing who dared to stop me when I was stomping Red Rian to death . . . Red Rian: that bearded ape, that thing I hate above all living creatures–who blasted the Scourge to atoms, and destroyed my mortal body. O, I shall annihilate him as surely as the sun of this stinking planet glows in the skies! I shall have tham all, each and every one of them! . . .* Blorg remembered everything.

He stepped out into the sunlight of Kallidor, gleaming like a starship on the day of its launching. The Kallidorians all stopped in their tracks and marvelled at this new engine of destruction the Dark Emperor had created.

But first I shall go to Sserp, Blorg thought, ignoring the perplexity of the Kallidorians as they attempted to probe his mind and failed. *I shall re-establish myself as lord of all the Ysss, and give the people of the serpent cause to fear and obey*

me. They shall learn once and for all who their master is, who it is that guides their high councils and controls the destiny of the race that administers the Dark Empire. Soon they will know fear.

Blorg made his way down a wide lane bordered by beds of red and violet flowers almost ten feet high. Suddenly, five dark forms emerged from the flower-beds and surrounded him. As the Devastator halted, he found himself at the center of a circle composed of five Ysss with drawn zappers. Turning slowly, he scanned the circle from zero to three-sixty: and there, at three-sixty, stood Quaarg.

What does this mean, Quaarg? he asked, the voice of his thoughts hushed as it reached the minds of the surrounding Ysss.

It means that you are about to die, Blorg, his rival answered. *By all rights, you should be dead. And so you shall be.* Quaarg raised his zapper and sighted at Blorg's chest.

Blorg never made a move. He just stood there, his terrible form gleaming in the center of the black and lethal circle.

Fire! Quaarg ordered the Ysss. Red bolts lanced out from the weapons as the lasers whined and sped to converge on the silver form in the center of the circle. A great hissing cloud of smoke arose when the lasers found their target, and Quaarg's vision was obscured.

When the smoke cleared, the terrible thing was still on its feet, and its outer-plating was not even scorched! *Fire again!* Quaarg screamed telepathically, mashing his finger down on the firing-button and holding it there.

Whaang!Whaang! Buh-h-wooof! Once again,

billows of smoke arose from the center of the black circle. Quaarg strained his eyes in a frantic attempt to peer through the acrid vapors. *No*, he thought, a feeling of horror freezing his guts, *it's not possible! The thing is still standing!*

With incredible speed and agility, Blorg made his move. Quaarg backed off as he watched the Devastator spin around and seize each of the Ysss by the throat with his four clutching hands. The lord of the Ysss just stood there, almost covered by the black, thrashing forms, glaring balefully at his rival while he strangled the conspirators with the inexorable precision of a machine.

You cannot kill me, Quaarg. Nothing can kill me now.

Quaarg the Destroyer screamed a mind-splitting telepathic scream of fright as he spun on his heel and bolted into the midst of the tall, sheltering flowers . . . .

CHAPTER FOUR

Project Immortality

O the gleaming ships streaked in, to Kendall's bright stars,
To that fatal engagement, in the galactic wars,
And the cannon did salvo, the great ships blew apart,
The cost of that conflict broke many a heart.

Come away from bloody Kendall,
Come away from that place,
Where the victors and the vanquished
Found their graves in deep space.

The Ballad of Bloody Kendall

As the bright starfleet streamed out of hyperspace, the plating of every ship in that great force flowing with the after-effects of electron exchange, Red Rian could still smell the fragrance of Nila's hair and feel the warmth of her body in the night. The skipper of the Hazard was as happy as a

man could be, notwithstanding the fact that he was about to do battle with the mighty black starships of the Dark Empire.

Catch 'em with their pants down, and kick 'em in the ass! That had been the essence of the star-pirate's advice to the League of Free Worlds on the eve of the Battle of Primula—that epic encounter that had resulted in the Dark Emperor's first major set-back, the destruction of the gigantic armada that had swept through other galaxies like a deadly plague.

Rian's phrase became a catchword among the allies (and the title of a popular song on Aurea Solis); and speed and flexibility became two of the major weapons in the League's arsenal. Their pilots trained by Rian, and their weaponry souped-up by Ween, the smaller craft of the allies had managed to out-maneuver and out-fight the black-plated behemoths that opposed them. The Fellowship's powers of mind had saved the day in the most critical engagements, but in the majority of other battles, it was the pilots and crews of the allied starships—men and women fighting for their homes and freedom—who defeated the larger forces of Ylang's huge slave empire.

They hadn't won all of the encounters, but they'd won most of them. Great numbers of Dark Empire starships were tied to their own galaxies, due to the rebellions that had sprung up everywhere after the bombardment and destruction of Flaigon. The enemy, although far superior in numbers, was never again able to muster a star-force anywhere near as overwhelming as the late armada. But each new galaxy took longer to liberate; each succeeding invasion had an escalating

cost to the allies in lives and material.

Rigid and inflexible at the outset, the Ysss commanders were learning their hard lesson. The double-team, triple-team, hit-and-run tactics of the allied pilots were losing their effectiveness now that the imperial starships no longer lumbered into battle in wide, charging lines. Now they clustered together in a great reinforcing mass and waited for the bright ships to make the first move, to come within range of their powerful laser-cannon. It was harder to overcome them now, and the strain and effort of the hard-fought contests was beginning to tell on the star-fighters of the League.

Over a dozen galaxies had already been liberated, and countless others were in revolt, but the economy of Primula (home of the League and Fellowship, and one of the richest of all star-seas) was beginning to suffer the consequences of supporting so many intergalactic struggles. Ylang's resources were so immense, and its subject-empire so vast, that the allies were beginning to feel, in their heart of hearts, that the enemy's supply of war-materials and personnel was endless. The virus of hopelessness had forced an entry into the bloodstream of the League, and was beginning to incubate its deadly poisons.

"Enemy force at two mil-telemikrons," a computer voice droned over the speakers of the Hazard. Purpur's nudge took Rian out of Nila's arms and deposited him in the hot-seat of the present. The star-pirate studied the dense cluster of blips on the ship's forward navi-screen. Neither he nor his first mate were pleased with what they saw there.

"Ooof!" he grunted, drumming with his fingers on the control console. "That must be the whole Kendallian space navy. The snakes must have snuffed-out all traces of rebellion in this galaxy to muster that many starships." Purpur nodded solemnly and growled in agreement with his skipper's analysis.

"Enemy force at one-point-seven-five mil-telemikrons," the toneless voice announced.

Rian activated the intrafleet communicator and leaned forward in his seat as he addressed the ships of the League. "Red Rian to all starships of the Kendall expedition: As I'm sure you can see by now, there's a cluster of enemy craft as big as my fist on the screens. The question is: Do we take 'em on, out-numbered to such a degree? Give me your votes on the board, commanders. One blip for yes, two blips for no."

All eyes in the Hazard's control-center were focused on the calcu-tally board above the console. A moment later, the red blips began to appear on the tally-screen, followed by a numerical read-out. *One blip. Two blips. Two blips. One blip:* the vote was close; the allies were almost evenly divided in their estimate of the situation.

"What do the bully-boys of the Hazard have to say about our next move?" Rian asked his crew over the intercom, as the tally continued to mount on the board's screen.

"Stomp the snakes!"

"Drive the scum out of Kendall!"

"Blast 'em all to hell!"

"Crack their heads an' break their bones!"

"Vaporize 'em!"

"Skipper, I promised my lady friend a snake-skin!"

The verdict was unanimous. The crew—to a man—were out for blood. Purpur registered the Hazard's vote on the tallyboard.

Rian chuckled at the last remark, which had come from Klegg. The buccaneer was very attached to the tough and grizzled old spacehawk, although he was careful not to show it in front of the crew. And damned if the old barafalo hadn't found himself an old lady on Greeb to party with! Klegg still had plenty of sap in his veins. Rian thought that the man embodied all that was best in the fighting spirit of the Hazard.

"Enemy force at one mil-telemikron," droned the mechanical voice.

But the tally reflected a different spirit. The force was of two minds about the strategy to be implemented. Rian hit the communicator button again. "It's even money on the board," he told the allied commanders. "They're gonna be hard to break up if we do go in, because they're clustered together thicker than kaagskrit. But I've got an idea. Hear me out and then vote on it."

Haaass! In the control-center of the *Dread,* High Admiral Muurq, commander of the spacenavy of Kendall, hissed his satisfaction as he glanced at the read-out evaluation of the enemy's strength. Beneath the gleaming one-way visor of his black helmet, the admiral smiled a cold, reptilian smile as he saw the bright ships cut their approach-speed drastically.

They are losing heart, he informed his forces, transmitting his thoughts over the communicator. *The tide is turning. A few more pitched battles,*

and you will not see a bright ship on the attack in any galaxy you choose to name.

Muurq's co-pilot hissed the snaky chuckle of the Ysss, a chuckle that had its counterpart in all the dark ships of the line.

Should they regain their nerve, which is unlikely, the admiral continued, *all ships are to stay together. No one is to break formation without my order to do so. But if they turn and flee, then all commanders are to pursue at top-speed, and hit them with all available firepower.*

"Enemy force at seven-five-oh telemikrons," a computer-voice blared out over the speakers of the *Dread.* The Ysss in the control-center hissed like a boiling cauldron.

They're coming in . . . and fanning out in twos and threes, my lord–as predicted, Muurq's co-pilot informed him.

Going for the flanks, he replied. *But when they get there, I'll give the order to encircle them. And tomorrow morning, there will be many empty places at the mess-tables of the League.*

Their activated shields gleaming like armored stars in the blackness of deep space, the League starships fanned-out in a wide pattern that flared with a thousand points of light. Suddenly they shot forward, closing the gap between them and the black vessels with incredible speed, sending out cannonades of flaring laser beams and incandescent volleys of proton-torpedos.

Depending on the strength of their screens, the Dark Empire starships held their fire at first, sacrificing the initial advantage in order to lure the enemy into its web of fire and steel. By the time they opened fire, the enemy ships were closing

with them, and beginning to batter down the defenses of both flanks. The big black craft opened fire with a concentrated burst that ripped open the surrounding darkness like a solar flare as they moved to encircle and engulf the smaller force.

But before this maneuver could be accomplished, the bright ships—acting in concert like the limbs of one single organism—veered off at a wrenching speed, and headed like a shower of silver arrows for the heart of the enemy formation.

Muurq could not believe his eyes as he watched the enemy force—each and every starship of it!—come in with torpedos whistling and all guns blazing, diving to converge with deadly accuracy on the center of his spacenavy, heading for a locus of points that just happened to be the exact center of his huge black starcruiser!

The area in space occupied by the spacenavy suddenly became the eye of a technological storm that rivalled the destructive capabilities of nature itself. As the bright ships sped in, too fast and too close now to be tracked by the gun-computers of the enemy, the black behemoths unleashed a frantic barrage of firepower in a panicked attempt to protect themselves.

This action did blow a small part of the enemy force to steaming bits, but the main result of the devastating close-range cannonade was the ripping and gutting of great numbers of imperial starships, crippling the defense-screens of some, tearing others apart, and sending an even greater number up in nova-like conflagrations that spread to the craft nearest them—causing a chain-reaction that resembled a link of borning suns.

"It's working, lads—it's working!" Red Rian

exulted over the intrafleet communicator. "They still don't have the reaction-time or the reflexes—they're still rigid!" The Hazard's beams shuddered and its decks heaved with the force of the firestorm that enveloped it as Rian took the ship deeper into the center of the disordered enemy formation.

"I'm going in on the flagship," he said hoarsely, lining-up the *Dread* in his gunsights. "Come in behind me as I blow that big tub of kraak into the next galaxy!"

Admiral Muurq stared at the vidscreen in disbelief: the bright ships streaked in from all four corners, the Hazard's streamlined shape forming the tip of the wedge that appeared before him.

Fire! Fire! All forward cannon fire! the High Admiral screamed telepathically, still watching his forward vidscreen in fascination as the laser-bolts from the Hazard's bow-cannon leaped out and filled his sight with the promise of red and searing death.

BOOM! BA-BOOOM! BAR-R-R-ROOOM! The *Dread* went up like a supernova, consumed in the technological fires of its backed-up reactors. The concussion from its exploding energies was so great that it sent the Hazard, and the wave of starcraft directly behind it, fifteen degrees off-course as they banked into a turn.

The wave that dove in after the explosion had spent its atomic fury decimating a great number of ships at the heart of the spacenavy. And the one that followed on its tail left a chain of exploding starships in its wake, each resultant explosion ringing out in the void like the bells of hell. The damage was immense; the spacenavy of Kendall,

strong as it still was, would never recover from the shock of that daring attack.

Now that the gigantic force's center had been broken, and its ships damaged and disordered up and down the line, the pilots of the League were free to revert to their former tactics. And they proved to be more effective than they had been in a long time: the hulking vessels of the Dark Empire, now that chaos was their supreme commander, fell prey to the swift, darting ships in great numbers as the League brought its powerful and intensified firepower to bear on the uncoordinated enemy.

After a long and terrible period of thermonuclear devastation, the spacenavy of Kendall managed to rally almost a third of its starships and streak off for the safety of hyperspace, losing a fair portion of its rear-guard along the way. The snakes had been beaten!

But the allies had taken a beating too. Fully a third of their ships had been destroyed in the action, and almost half of those remaining had incurred serious damage. Recall was sounded throughout the fleet and the bright ships headed into hyperspace, going home after their most costly victory to date. The Battle of Kendall—Bloody Kendall, as it came to be called—made many orphans.

Inside the Hazard, Red Rian went from deck to deck, from fore to aft, as he conducted a grim survey. As the leader of the attack-force, the good ship had sustained the greatest damage of its fighting career. Rian wept in his heart as he counted the dead and consoled the wounded. He'd lost over forty-five men, nearly a quarter of his crew, and each of them had been a friend.

With the exception of the time he'd received the news that Blorg had destroyed his entire homeworld, it was the saddest day of the star-pirate's life. At the start of the grim survey, he wept in his heart; by the time it was ended, he wept tears with his eyes as well.

The last place he entered was the Hazard's stern torpedo-room, the spot that had sustained the greatest damage during the battle. Not one man in it was left alive. The section was a tangle of fused beams and twisted torpedo-racks, of blood-spattered walls and charred bodies. Rian sat down in the center of a great heap of ashes and began to cry. Purpur knelt down beside his friend and rubbed up against him in sympathy. The star-pirate opened his hand and held it out for the cat-man to see. Purpur yowled a soft, plaintive meow as he recognized old Klegg's signet ring.

"He's dead, Purr," Rian said, wiping away his tears as the felinoid helped him to his feet. "They're all dead. I can't believe it."

As Purpur was leading him out of the room, Rian suddenly stopped in his tracks and gazed at the dead man's ring. "Well," he muttered, his voice thick with emotion, "at least he got a few snake-skins for his lady friend."

"You know something, Purr," Rian told his first mate as they went through the hatch, "that grizzled old starsweeper was the closest thing I ever had to a father."

The Great Devourer blazed and churned like the spirit of a holocaust, its turbulent energies illuminating the lair with a brightness almost equal to the daylight outside. Forming a semicircle in the

center of the vast chamber, the leaders of the Kallidorians stood before the Dark Emperor and looked upon its terrible being with white, unblinking eyes that had neither eyeball nor pupil.

Their evolution, concentrated as it was on their powers of mind, had left them sightless; they saw with the eyes of the mind, with a telepathic coordination of all their senses. They were humanoid in appearance, tall and fair to look upon, and clothed in bright, flowing garments of many colors, dazzling in the ingenuity of their combinations. Kallidorians were extremely sensitive to the different vibrations emitted by colors, and to the emanations of texture as well. An inward development may have rendered their eyes unnecessary, but all of their other senses were heightened to an amazing degree.

Ylang-Ylang had just received news of the League's costly victory in the galaxy of Kendall, and felt fairly confident as it entered the latest round of negotiations with its powerful hosts. *A few more victories like that,* the Devourer gloated privately, *and the League of Free Worlds will no longer be able to afford the price of playing the great galactic game. I could, perhaps, just bide my time and wait. The Fellowship of Light would never be so foolhardy as to attack Kallidor itself, but Garthane worries me. I can never predict his moves. I must see to it that all of the purple-cowled little things are exterminated–each and every one of them!*

My lords and gracious hosts, the Devourer purred, *have you given full consideration to my generous offer?*

We have, great Ylang, their spokesman answered, stepping forward from the center of the semicircle and sending his thoughts into the huge energic conflagration that was the Dark Emperor. *And we are greatly tempted. But yet . . . .*

Sweet lords, Ylang-Ylang cooed, its thought-voice as dark and bittersweet as an orchestra of chocolate, *why do you hesitate? I offer you the means to out-live the stars themselves; to extend and increase your already formidable abilities so that you may understand and manipulate the deepest secrets of the Infinite. If you accept, you will be as gods.*

There is one further piece of information we need before this matter can be decided. We wish to enter your mind, Ylang, and know what you were, as well as what you are.

S-s-s-sso, the Devourer hissed, *you would know of the Mordlings, of the race that fathered me? Will the emperor grant us this privilege?*

Not a creature alive in the whole of the living universe beside myself has ever seen the greatness and glory that was the Mordling empire, Ylang replied, his mass blazing with a thousand lapping tongues of flame, all foul and beautiful at the same time. *Have the lords and ladies of Kallidor the right to ask for this privilege?* it asked seductively, in a honeyed voice of sweet corruption and dark, destructive loveliness.

We have, great Ylang, replied the spokesman, his robe billowing behind him in the gusts of searing wind that arose from the Lord of Life and Death's consuming energies. *For we are bound to you in the same way that you are bound to us.*

Then come into my mind, the Devourer replied.

The battered starfleet limped into Taylos and dispersed, its component units going back to their home-bases. When the Hazard touched-down at Gaaro, a crowd surged out to meet it; and at the head of that crowd were two women, one blonde and copper-skinned and the other black-haired and dark as an equatorial evening.

"Oh, Rian—Rian!" Nila whispered as she hugged the star-pirate fiercely. "We heard reports of the devastation. I wasn't sure you'd be coming back."

He stroked her hair tenderly, but his face was as grim as death. "Many men and women didn't come back," he said flatly. "There were so damned many of them. There always are . . . . And it's getting harder to take them every time."

Nila's tears fell on his cheek as she kissed him. "I was so worried about you," she told him, putting his arm around her shoulder as they walked off.

"I lost a quarter of my crew," he said in a small, dazed voice. "Almost fifty men. They were all my friends . . . . "

"Ween! Oh, Ween baby!" Oruna cried as she rushed to embrace the Hazard's chief tech-head. "Are you all right, child?" She kissed him tenderly and stroked his hair.

Ween turned to stare at the med-techs who were beginning to evacuate the wounded from the Hazard. "You remember Klegg?" he asked Oruna. "The old guy with the long beard who always used to give me a hard time?"

"Yes, honey," she answered softly.

"Well, he's dead," Ween said, his voice breaking. Oruna looked at him and saw there were tears

in his eyes.

"Oh, Ween!" she whispered, feeling the pain of his loss.

"And others are dead, too. So many others . . . . "

Purpur stood outside the Hazard and stared up at the gaping holes and acres of scorched plating on her hull. His thoughts were far away: on Yahwoo, with his family and his sweetheart, Maowl. He gave a sad little yowl as he realized how close he had come to never seeing them again.

And as he slowly walked away from the starship, it seemed that he could already hear the death-bells tolling in the air of a hundred worlds, as all the liberated galaxies went into mourning . . . .

Enter into my mind, Ylang-Ylang boomed, its consuming energies flickering brightly over the anxious faces of the Kallidorians. *And I will show you the glories of my fathers–the ancient Mordlings!*

Then the Devourer dove into the mnemonic ocean of recall, and the Kallidorians descended with it, down into the depths of memory; and further down, into the trench of the imprinted history of a race. Their descent became an adventure, a multisensorial experience, felt with a totality of perception that enabled the past of the masters of the Morde galaxy to come alive with the vividness of the eternal present.

In a montage of dazzling speed and detail, the Kallidorians witnessed the beginnings of a race older than the stones of most worlds, older even than the fires that burn at their cores. They saw the

dim beginnings of the Mordlings, at a time when some galaxies were still nothing but great pockets of chaos and darkness in the void; the coming-to-consciousness of the giant creatures who raised the arts of evil and technology to their highest levels of attainment.

Everything the Mordlings built was on a colossal scale: cities carved out of living mountains; massive, shadowy temples fit only for dark gods; highways as broad as great rivers, spanning the continents of Flaigon in straight, unbroken lines, levelled mountains and giant tunnels the markings of their irresistible progress; starships huge enough to hold an entire city, driven by reactors with the power to illuminate a planet.

The Mordlings themselves were forty-foot giants who moved with the sureness of cats and struck with the suddenness of serpents. Their scaled hides were as bright as the plates of a starship, and they shone with all the rainbow colors of corruption: outraged reds, morbid violets, desolate yellows; browns that hinted of rot and waste, blues as cold as death in winter; the lurid greens of vegetable decay and the oily black of absolute evil.

Their cavernous mouths housed an arsenal of long, dagger-sharp teeth that dripped a sulphurous and reeking venom; their throats were dark tunnels, and the voices that issued from them sounded like trumpets of brass, colored by tones of rage and madness. Their arms were tree trunks and their legs were pillars; their torsos were as solid as hills. Their hands were designed to rend and throttle, and their claws were like swords. The beams of their eyes blazed like searchlights in hell.

Beautiful! Beautiful! the Devourer raved, as its

memory-banks incarnated its ancestors. *Are they not the wonder of the universe, the true embodiment of all its glories?*

The Kallidorians made no reply. They could not. It was all they could do to keep from losing consciousness, as they struggled to withstand the intense buffets of wild energy that emanated from the Dark Emperor's overworked mind. Sweat ran down their pale faces; their knees buckled and their breath came in labored gasps; but still they forced themselves to experience the frightful spectacle.

What they saw next was the Mordling rise to power: the incredible way the giants married their awesome superscience to their highly-developed powers of mind—powers unhampered by morals or ethics, powers dedicated solely to the refinement and perfection of evil. The Mordlings killed as naturally as they breathed, and had no compunctions about killing each other if that other happened to represent an obstacle to ambition. At that moment, as they watched and felt the hallucinatory vision of this supremely evil race consolidating its murderous power, the startled and buffeted Kallidorians suddenly realized that the Mordlings—each and every one of them, from the first to the last—were insane. They were a race born to madness as well as to genius.

Next came the foundation and expansion of the Mordling empire, its extension out into the Morde galaxy (giving it their name as they conquered it) and beyond: the birth of the first great empire of the stars. Ylang's cries of joy rent the minds of the spectators, as it relived the corrupt glories of its demented ancestors.

Finally, the fall of the Mordlings, those geniuses of evil whose life-span was more than a hundred times that of a humanoid. Crazed with bloodlust and the quest for the perfection of evil, the giants warred among themselves. Their savagery forced them to retire beneath the surface of their homeworld; the empire disintegrated while they killed each other off in the bowels of Flaigon. It was a time of fire and devastation, a world drowning in its own blood.

Doomed by their own unbending ruthlessness and will-to-evil, the Mordlings died off. Only one remained, the sole inhabitant of the subterranean Forbidden City of Kordor: Ylang-Ylang, the last and most brilliant member of the evilest civilization ever to pollute the living universe.

And then, in the span of a few seconds, the Kallidorians felt the weight of Ylang's aeons of research into superscience and the ways of darkness: the age-long process that resulted in his horrible and flaming transformation into a new and unimaginable entity—an immortal being!

Ylang's fires banked low as its mind returned to the present; the terrible spectacle was over. The Dark Emperor's thundering mass grew quiet as it steeped itself in restoring blackness. *Now they will decide*, it thought with the last thoughts of its ebbing consciousness. *After what they have beheld, they must choose soon.*

Pale and shaking, the Kallidorians backed off unsteadily and tottered out of the lair. They had seen—and felt—the presence of the hideous things who were the ancient Mordlings; and they were revolted. They knew that Ylang-Ylang, for all its immortal power and dark glory, was in-

sane . . . .

But they had also experienced the unthinkably seductive glories of the unrestrained will-to-power, of the exaltation that arises from the exercise of conquest and domination; they had felt the full and visionary seduction of absolute evil. None of them were unmoved by that unspeakable experience; and some of them would be changed forever. Ylang was counting on that . . . .

Bloody Kendall had left a wake of widows, widowers and orphans throughout the free galaxies. In an unusual gesture of respect, the League declared a two-week period of mourning. During that time, sorrow hung in the air of the allied worlds like a cloud of poison-gas.

But life goes on, and all healthy creatures regain their taste for it. Garthane addressed the allied peoples in a simulcast from Greeb. He spoke long and eloquently in an attempt to revive the flagging spirits of the exhausted allies. He praised the dead and the living for their great sacrifices. And then, he told his audience what was to come.

"You have all sacrificed and accomplished much," Garthane said, eyes grave above his serene smile. "Much more than anyone had a right to expect. But," he sighed, "even though the Dark Empire is in turmoil, Ylang-Ylang remains safe under the protection of the powerful and mysterious beings known as Kallidorians.

"As long as they protect the star-tyrant, we shall never overcome the Dark Empire. The resources of that vast slave empire are just too immense. But there is another way . . . one last chance."

He paused for a moment. "The Fellowship of Light has now been revitalized, and will soon be at a strength comparable to that of its prime in the era before Primula's Great Peace. We will undertake to make the next move ourselves. We have not yet fully developed our strategy, but we will inform you all the moment we have."

Garthane looked straight into the vidcam as it zoomed-in slowly on his serene countenance and burning eyes. "We will do our utmost to aid our brothers and sisters in the League and all the liberated worlds," he continued. "Before all of you, young and old, male and female, I pledge my life on it." He blessed the audience as his image began to fade out. "Infinity is at the heart of all things. All things are one."

Purpur, Ween and Oruna had been dining with Nila and Rian, and all of them had watched the vidscreen with rapt attention. When the transmission ended, they all exchanged puzzled looks.

"What d'you suppose Garthane meant by that?" Ween asked, scratching his frizzy blond head.

"I really don't know," Nila replied.

"Neither do I," Red Rian added. "But you can count on one thing: that man is always full of surprises."

"Let's hope he's got a good one coming up," said Oruna, as she nestled her head on Ween's shoulder. " 'Cause we're sure gonna need a miracle . . . . "

CHAPTER FIVE

Blorg The God

Inside the chamber where they had retired after Ylang-Ylang's soul-shaking psycho-sensory recreation of the days of its monstrous ancestors, the Kallidorian leaders sat slumped with exhaustion on their bright divans. A full hour passed before anyone spoke; the experience had been so shattering that all of them struggled in proud silence to regain their composure. Ylang had left its mark on each and every one of them.

The first to speak was a woman. Tall and fair, she had finely-chiseled features and thick auburn hair that fell to the small of her back.

"I have never seen anything to equal it," she said. "The horror, the horror."

A man rose and faced her, staring sightlessly at her with his white eyes. He was handsome and well-made, as all the Kallidorians seemed to be; his blond hair fell in waves to his shoulders.

"It *was* horrible, Aleana," he said quietly. "But those things knew power as no other creatures

ever have."

"What is the good of power, Andane," the Kallidorian spokesman asked from his seat, "if it is wielded after the fashion of the Mordlings?" His hair was black and shining as he faced them in the light that shone down from overhead. He shared the same cold beauty as his companions.

"Ilax, you're jumping to a conclusion," Andane cautioned. "The uses of power are not necessarily evil."

"No," Ilax told him, a slight smile turning up the corners of his mouth. "But the abuses of power are."

"And power of that kind is informed by evil, totally permeated by its influence."

"I do not accept that premise, Aleana," Andane told the auburn-haired woman. "We are already powerful, but we are not essentially evil. Power is a tool. Evil arises out of the intentions of its users."

All of the Kallidorians in the chamber listened to the argument with interest.

Still unconvinced, Aleana shook her head. "Whatever comes in contact with the works of the Mordlings will be corrupted. And remember, Ylang is a Mordling, at bottom."

"No!" Andane retorted sharply. "We are secure enough in ourselves to transform that power." There was a strange, visionary look on his face. "And the power that comes from immortality would enable us to do what no one before us had ever done . . . to part the great veil of existence and see into the heart of the deepest mysteries of the living universe."

Aleana looked frightened when she heard that.

"The horror would transform you before you ever reached your great goal."

"Power and horror," Ilax interrupted, rising from his seat. "This is what we must choose between."

Inside the darkened lair, the Great Devourer drifted in the tossing seas of its wild and lightless ecstasy. It rested content now, having seen the vessel of its ambitions suddenly drift within reach, it had known this from the expressions on the faces of some of the Kallidorians, as they experienced the dark seductions of unlimited power.

I have them, Ylang thought, rumbling like the center of a dark star. *Or at least, enough of them for my purposes. I do not even need most of them. A few will do.*

Then the Dark Emperor, totally freed from anxiety for the first time in over two years, submerged to the deepest, darkest part of that foul ocean of self-induced *extasis*. It shuddered and orgasmed from the excitation of its awful visions, as it coursed in spirit through star-seas of blood and star-fields of bones, on its way to devour worlds and suns, to drain the living universe of its vital energies until it alone was the sole bright body in the graveyard of existence.

AHHH-H-H! . . . OOO-O-O AAAAAH! The awful and immortal thing sang out with all the hideous music in its corrupt soul as it sounded, like a demon-whale, to the deepest place in its being. The Lord of Life and Death hit the bottom of its terrible soul and lost itself in the obscene muck of its ultimate fantasy: *the Great Devourer imagined it devoured itself!*

Every soul in Cerebron, capital city of Kallidor,

shivered as the foul waves of Ylang's dark joy broke over their minds. The Kallidorians shuddered as visions of power and horror flooded their minds once more. The guards and slaves of the Dark Emperor—animaloid, insectoid and humanoid alike—stiffened as their emotions were tossed about like small craft on an angry sea. The Ysss, Ylang's murderous devotees, hissed highly-pitched hisses and gurgled loudly as visions of carnage and desolation washed over their consciousness.

And then, when the waves had finally subsided, the Ysss ordered the guards and slaves to look sharp and resume their tasks. For in one of the spacious buildings that adjoined the Dark Emperor's lair, the Ysss (with minds programmed in advance by Ylang) were overseeing the construction of a huge complex of strange and intricate machinery.

They did not understand what it was that they were building, or why the tyrant had decided to built it; it was enough that Ylang had ordered them to do so . . . .

Blorg's new flagship, the *Darkness Eternal*, thundered down to the desert world of Sserp, followed by the black and mighty cruisers of the Ysss high command. The homeworld of the people of the serpent was a global den of hissing activity as the Devastator's starship touched-down at the spaceport of Piiithon, capital city of that desolate planet.

The Devastator lived! High anxiety overtook the reptiloids as they watched the welcoming procession on their vidscreens. Huge and gleaming, as

horribly beautiful as the serpent-god himself, the lord of all the Ysss marched through the city's gates to the beat of drums made from the flesh of enemies, and the fierce braying of brazen war-trumpets.

Marching behind the silver giant were the Ysss high command; and behind them marched troopers of the Death Legion, the killer-elite of the empire's forces—ten thousand strong. All the Ysss in the city prostrated themselves when their lord entered through the gates, their numbers stretching out in a dark mass that hissed and roiled like a boiling ocean. The hearts of the people of the serpent were filled with dread in the presence of the reborn Devastator.

Haaa-aa-aaass! Haaa-aa-aaass! Awestruck hisses rang out in the dry air and travelled down the narrow, undulating streets; echoed among black building that rose in the air like serpents about to strike; darted up to the cruel sun that glared down and cracked the pavements: the Ysss were stricken with a planetary anxiety as they realized that Blorg was no longer like themselves. He was a new and different being; something they no longer understood, something they feared instinctively.

Broadcast technicians swamed over the entire expanse of the Great Hall, coordinating all last-minute details in the seconds that were left before the lord of the Ysss and his retinue entered. Already seated on a number of onyx thrones at the front of the hall were the highest officials of Sserp. And in their midst, on the throne that sat by the right hand of the one in the very center, sat an old and bent female, draped in flowing robes the color

of night, on whose borders were embroidered the shapes of bleached white skulls.

This was Siiin, dowager-empress of Sserp, the brood-mother of Blorg the Devastator. Once Blorg had plotted and murdered his way to the top and deposed his predecessor, the Ysss had elevated Siiin (who had the great honor of spawning the current lord of the Ysss) above all other females of her kind. And she rejoiced in her good fortune, rejoiced in her heart at the bloody triumphs of her son, rejoiced with that fierce pride that nature instills in the breasts of mothers. Blorg was from her last brood, and she was (in her own reptilian way) very fond of him.

Yet even Siiin was shocked when Blorg entered the Great Hall of the Ysss, and she beheld for the first time the terrible thing her son had become.

But, god-like though he now was, when he bowed low before her and acknowledged her above all others on Sserp, the void in her breast that had been created by shock was transformed into a swelling tide of rejoicing.

He was lost to me when the star-pirate broke him, she thought, her eyes still wide at the spectacle of her son's new incarnation. *But he has returned–greater than all the Ysss. And still, all that he is, all that he was, is shaped by what I made of him*. The mother of the demon of the machine was as proud of her son as any mother who ever lived under the bright stars.

The drums rumbled a thunder of flayed skin and the war-trumpets brayed their harsh music, signalling that Blorg was about to address his people. And when the massive silver form rose from the onyx throne, its fearsome beauty reflecting the hot

lights of technology, a world gasped in unison and hissed in a planetary chorus of awe.

People of the serpent, Blorg began, his thoughts ringing out in the hall, *keepers of the empire, angels of Death, children of great Ylang: I have returned to claim what is mine!*

All of the Ysss on Sserp averted their eyes as Blorg's glance slashed through the hall and onto the vidcams, concentrated into twin beams of unbearable brightness. All but Siiin: she stared up at her son with lidless, unblinking eyes that were bright with pride and wonder.

Now, she thought privately, *Blorg will deal with the upstarts who fought to succeed him when they thought he was dead. Now he will consolidate the energies and ambition of our people and magnify our greatness. And I shall go to my grave secure in the knowledge that he will rule the Yss forever.*

My people have neglected their duty to Father Ylang in recent months, Blorg continued. *They have neglected their allegiance to the Dark Empire. And when the rumor of the emperor's death had spread–as if immortal Ylang could ever die!–the people of the serpent fought among themselves, squabbling over the imagined spoils of empire in the manner of petty chieftains and hill-bandits. Never has a race as mighty as ours disgraced itself in such fashion!*

But this shall never happen again. This is why I have come here: to make you this promise and to visit my displeasure upon the people of Sserp.

Dith! Feng! Skaaal! Nethii! Sliinq! Blorg's thought-voice boomed. *Come before me!*

Anticipation rose like a wind throughout Sserp as the five ranking members of the Ysss high

command rose obediently and slithered up to stand before their lord. Every reptiloid old enough to understand the politics of the desertworld knew that each of these commanders had been hand-picked by Quaarg after the latter's great purge of the ranks.

You are now deprived of your commands, Blorg thundered, stretching out his arms toward the quaking reptiloids. *And your lives!*

Whaang! Whaang! Punctuating this sentence of death, a volley of laser-beams shot out from Blorg's fingers and incinerated the five commanders. When the smoke cleared, all that was left of them was an eddy of black ashes that swirled lazily to the ground.

Blorg turned to face the ranks of the assembled Ysss high command. Behind each seated reptiloid stood two Death Legion commandos. The entire Ysss audience stared at Blorg so intently that none of them even noticed the commandos' subtle movements, or saw the glinting knives appear in their hands.

All Blorg did was to raise his upper-right hand in the air, hold it there for a second, and then bring it down sharply. That was all it took to start a bloodbath, as the commando pairs leaned forward, held back the heads of the reptiloids in front of them, and slit their throats.

Not all of them, though. Only the ones Quaarg had appointed. Those who had survived from Blorg's former administration were left alive. He would test their loyalties at his convenience.

Siiin was thrilled by this display of her immortal son's power. Old as she was, her ophidian heart still rejoiced at the sight of freshly-spilled blood.

She was very happy.

Now there are many vacancies, Blorg announced after the bloodbath had ended. *And there will be many promotions for those who give themselves up entirely to the service of the Dark Emperor.*

But first I must go among you, Blorg told the inhabitants of his homeworld, *and lay the foundation for the future security of the empire.*

When he said that, every adult male reptiloid on Sserp shivered and hissed as he felt the sharp claws of Death scrape his scales . . . .

Ween Leever wore a puzzled frown as he and Oruna walked down the long hall that led to his tech-shop. Altektu and D-Anacom had summoned him there suddenly, and he hadn't the slightest inkling of what they were up to.

Ween had been greatly troubled by O-V-1's behavior since he met Oruna. He knew that the robot was jealous. He knew that, but he didn't know what to do about it. He also knew that the two androids had been seeing a lot of O-V-1 recently in an attempt to effect a therapeutic solution to the mechanoid's problems.

"Gee, I hope they can do something for Ovie," Ween said as they entered the workshop. "He's in a bad way these days."

"They're the ones to do it," Oruna replied, running a long, four-pronged comb through the halo of her thick, black hair. "Those two have got more sensitivity and understanding than anybody I ever met."

They entered the workshop and were met by the two soft machines, who immediately escorted

them up the center aisle to a bank of tall lockers at the room's far end. O-V-1 stood at the left-hand side of the lockers, activated but subdued.

"Hiya Ovie," Ween said softly. "How's things?"

"Fine, thank you, Mr. Ween," the robot answered, with unaccustomed terseness.

"Hi there, Ovie," Oruna whispered.

"Good morning, Ms. Oruna," it replied flatly.

There was a worried look on Ween's face as he turned to Altektu and D-Anacom. "How's Ovie, folks? Is he . . . all right?"

"Ovie's doing very well," the beautiful D-Anacom told him. "He understands now that you have a right to be interested in a fellow-humanoid—especially one with whom you are so compatible."

"And," Altektu added, his eyes glowing like gems in the green setting of his permaflesh features, "he has also gained several valuable insights into the reasons for his habit of compulsive-talking."

O-V-1's talkie-track crackled into activity. "Yes," it said. "Anxiety and loneliness, both aggravating a deep-seated technological insecurity."

"It's a common complaint among mechanoids," D-Anacom told Ween and Oruna. "Many of us feel—and often with good cause—that biomechs do not take us seriously."

Ween and Oruna didn't know what to say.

"We have tried to remedy Ovie's condition therapeutically," Altektu said. "And we have been successful—to a degree."

"But something further was needed," D-Anacom continued. "So we prepared a little

surprise for him.''

The two graceful androids walked over to a center locker and tapped on its door. ''You may come out now,'' D-Ana said.

As the door of the locker swung open slowly, Ween and Oruna leaned forward. O-V-1 wheeled around on its rollers, squeaking in anticipation.

The robot crackled and the humanoids gasped as a barrel-shaped figure emerged from within the deep locker.

''Why, it's a duplicate model of Ovie,'' Ween said, surprise rocketing his voice into a higher register.

The robot was strikingly similar to O-V-1 in every detail, but its lines were a touch gentler and its colors a hint more delicate.

''O-V-1,'' Altektu said, turning to Ween's techno-companion, ''meet O-V-2 . . . your counterpart.''

''You . . . are . . . my . . . counterpart?'' O-V-1 asked O-V-2 in the flat hesitant voice of its mechanoid curiosity.

''Affirmative,'' the second robot replied.

O-V-1 turned to the android couple. ''Mr. Al, Ms. D-Ana,'' it said. ''What am I supposed to do now?''

The androids smiled. ''Talk to it, Ovie,'' D-Anacom told O-V-1.

''But nobody wants to listen to me anymore,'' the robot replied sadly.

The second robot's talkie-track crackled on. ''That is incorrect,'' it said flatly. ''You are a Class Primo, mobile fixit unit with vast experience and knowledge. It is only logical that I should wish to benefit from your wisdom.''

''You do?'' was all that O-V-1 could crackle.

''Affirmative,'' O-V-2 replied. ''Further, I have been given to understand that you are a student of ethical behavior, which is a field of considerable interest to mechanoids and bio-mechs alike. I wish to talk with you regarding this as well.''

''You do?'' O-V-1 repeated, its voice a-crackle with wonder.

''Double affirmative. Request permission to be your counterpart and learn at your side.''

O-V-1 made no immediate reply, but the others could hear the clack and shuttle of its relay circuits as they buzzed and hummed with furious activity.

''Mr. Ween,'' the robot said finally, ''have I your permission?''

Ween beamed at his techno-companion. ''Sure you do, Ovie,'' he replied warmly.

''Permission granted,'' the robot told its new counterpart. Then it turned around and faced the others. ''Mr. Ween, Al, D-Ana . . . Ms. Oruna: I will leave you now. Thank you for everything.''

''Have a good time, Ovie,'' Ween said as the two robots began to roll down the aisle.

''One of the great problems for all higher lifeforms,'' O-V-1 said as it rolled off, ''mechanoid and bio-mech, is the problem of how we ought to live. Not how we *do* live, but how we *should* live.''

''This is most interesting,'' O-V-2 replied, hanging on O-V-1's every word, all mechanoid ears.

''Isn't that sweet,'' Oruna said as she clasped the hands of the two loving androids.

''Thank you so much,'' Ween told them as he watched the robots cross to the other end of the workshop. ''Y'know something,'' he went on, beaming like the sun of Greeb, ''I think he's gonna

be all right, now.''

Back in the Primula galaxy, on the planet Palos, in the great stone citadel that sat on the edge of a broad red plain, the halls and temples of the Fellowship of Light were filled with more spiritual activity than they had known in centuries. Not since the order of material arts-mystics had been the guardians of that galaxy, in the days before the era of the Great Peace, had so many souls been engaged in the quest for spiritual perfection, striving to develop their powers of mind through the ineffable state of union with the Infinite, with the dark center of the great organism that is the living universe.

Most of the Fellowship's old members had left to join their High Master on Greeb, and the thousands of new initiates from Primula and the liberated galaxies, as well as the hand-picked contingent of Greeban volunteers, were being trained by the few old members who remained . . . and Dann Oryzon.

Dann plunged into his work like a man possessed, exerting all his energies in a focused concentration of mind and body that constantly amazed his superior, Brother Camenarpo. Garthane had told his son that the pathway out of the quicksands of regret and depression rests upon the bedrock of purpose and engagement. Getting out of oneself, the active demonstration of one's essential relatedness to the world and its works: that was the key to wholeness. Self-pity and anguish were counter-productive: negative states that leeched the will-to-live and drained the spirit of its bright vitality. One must accept the inevitable and

proceed from there, drawing strength from the promise of the future, while at the same time restoring the foundations of the soul in order to erect the bridges that were needed to reach that future.

This was also possible, paradoxically enough, by withdrawing into oneself; by penetrating to one's very core, past the many layers of self-involvement and compensatory fantasy. Dann was able to get in touch with the deepest part of himself—the solid center and heart of his individual reality—by means of Deep Meditation, the Fellowship's highly-developed form of union with the Infinite.

Mind and body, body and mind: Dann respected the essential interrelatedness of the two, and worked his hardest to put himself in touch with both aspects of his mortal being.

Developing his body through the exercise and teaching of the galactic martial arts skills (keedo, mudu, alepso and many others) practiced by the Fellowship, he disciplined his actions and reactions, thereby expanding the range of his grace, skill and confidence.

Through union with the Infinite, he experienced the ecstasy of relatedness, the divine feeling that comes from the dark, internal knowledge that the ground of the universe lies deep within us; that we are as much a necessary and integral part of it as the vast and far-flung galaxies themselves. Men and insects, sand and stars . . . all are part of the endless ocean of being and existence.

And this knowledge he passed on to the new members and volunteers. And they all worked to the full extent of their energies and capacities, driven by the terrible awareness that the life and

freedom of their people might well depend on the strength of their achievements.

The final element in the Fellowship's training program was intended to temper the uses of strength with the discretion and compassion of wisdom. In the various chambers of the order's high temple, the members and initiates experienced and learned the various wisdoms of existence: of the body and the spirit, of friendship and love.

And in the Chamber of the Infinite Oneness, the order's highest place, they joined their minds and souls in a mind-lock. All rose into the air in a collective demonstration of concentrated and unified powers of mind, levitating as the physical expression of that exquisite and ecstatic communion of souls, all sharing together in the substance of the Infinite.

Valennia was there with Dann, and she participated in all the rigorous training of the apprentices without a single complaint. Her dedication and concentration made a deep impression on old Camanarpo as well as Dann. It was obvious that she was searching for many things, both in her life and in her soul.

She and Dann saw each other every day as they worked, although their moments alone were rare. But when they were alone together, they shared a friendship that continued to grow, a trust and intimacy that turned to seek the light of their spirits as a long-stemmed Sunwatcher turns in the direction of the warming sun.

And if Valennia was with Dann, someone else was with him as well. Nila was with him in those lost, lonely moments when his strength was all

used up; in those grey, aching moments between sleep and waking when his soul felt the pain of his loss most acutely.

But he accepted this as he accepted everything else in his life. He accepted it as part of healing. And in a way that warmed his heart, it was good to see Nila.

One day, when all the Fellowship members and initiates on Palos were in Deep Meditation, a voice from the next galaxy spoke in their minds.

Brothers and sisters of the Fellowship, it said. *Dann Oryzon, my son. This is Garthane. Open your minds to me, and listen carefully to what I am about to tell you. It is of the greatest importance to all of us . . . .*

At the same time, but in separate quarters, two pair of lovers lay in each other's arms. They had already exchanged the physical expressions of their deep love, and were now drifting in the pleasant aftermath of that intense experience, waiting for their souls to return to their bodies, trading light kisses and tender caresses as they did.

Red Rian turned on his side and snuggled closer to Nila, seeking the warmth of her body. Nila's hands brushed his arms as she took him into the bright circle of her warmth.

"I could die happy now," the star-pirate whispered in her ear.

"That's a touch morbid, don't you think?" she whispered back.

"I couldn't think of a better way to go."

"Perhaps not. But there's a lot to live for, isn't there?"

He kissed her forehead, and then drew back to look into her eyes. "Not if Ylang has its way."

Her smile disappeared. "That's true. Garthane's address tonight frightened me. He sounded so grim."

Rian nodded. "Yeah. He means business this time."

"I was frightened," Nila told her lover, "when he said that the Fellowship's old guard were going to Kallidor and that they might not come back."

"Nila," Rian said hesitantly, "After watching Garthane's address tonight, I made a big decision of my own. He's going to Kallidor in the Hazard."

Her grey eyes told him that she already knew. "I figured you'd have to get into the act. And I'm going with you."

He hugged her tightly. "I was gambling on that, love."

"Well," she whispered, running her cool fingers down the nape of his neck, "if you live with someone, you might as well die with them."

"Now who's morbid?" Rian asked, his senses responding to her body's sweet invitation.

Ween and Oruna exchanged a long series of light, pecking kisses, partaking of their love like birds at a feeder.

Suddenly, Ween stopped and snuggled close to his sweetie, nestling his head on her breast. "Oruna," he said in a small voice. "Uh, about what Garthane said tonight . . . You know Rian's gonna want to go with him."

"Her long, slender fingers stroked his cheek. "What about Chief Tech-head Ween Leever?" she asked.

"Me, too," he mumbled guiltily.

"Then there's only one problem," Oruna told him.

"What's that?" he asked, raising his head to look at her.

"How to get me on board the Hazard."

"Y-You mean you w-want to go w-with me?"

"Ain't gonna be no fun here without you, child."

Ween beamed like a lumi-torch. Then his look grew serious. "But nobody might ever . . . come back, Oruna."

"That doesn't make any difference, Ween," she told him as they began to hug and kiss. "I want to be with you. For keeps."

"Uh, yah. I'll ask Rian in the morning."

Oruna drew back and stared at him, a proud look on her face. "Never mind about askin' him, Ween," she replied in that sweet, sassy way of hers. "You *tell* him!"

"Aye-aye, skipper," Ween replied, steering the ship of his soul into the safe haven of Oruna's arms.

Fire and bloodshed, death and devastation. Blorg swept across his homeworld like the angel of the pit, and left a wide swath of blood and ashes in his wake. His vengeance was so terrible and thorough that it caused the Ysss to know fear as they had never known it before . . . as they had never even imagined it before.

He cast his shadow over Sserp like the god of vengeance, and those it fell upon perished. The reptiloids trembled at the mere mention of his name; his presence was no longer necessary. And the Ysss, that deadly race who worshiped at the

dark altar of Death, that sinister people, were so awed by their leader's visitation that they made Blorg a god.

They overturned the altars and statues of Hiisazel the serpent-god, and raised new ones to Blorg the Devastator. For days they celebrated with great hissing snake dances and bloody, living sacrifices. They rejoiced in their dark hearts as they had never done before. The old god had been overthrown and a new god had come to take his place. In the midst of all the carnage and desolation, the people of the serpent rejoiced and celebrated the coming of their dark messiah.

You were great before, the mother of the new deity told her son on the day he was to leave for Kallidor. *But now you are an immortal god.*

Father Ylang made me immortal, Blorg replied, *and my people made me a god. But it is fitting, for I shall surely outlive our race.*

You have come and the people of the serpent rejoice.

They do, indeed, Blorg told his mother. *And soon I will encounter our enemies, and then the Yss will have full cause for rejoicing.*

CHAPTER SIX

Garthane's Bold Move

As the Hazard lifted-off from the surface of Greeb, the hopes of all the peoples of the liberated galaxies as well as the rebels who fought for their freedom throughout the Dark Empire went with it. Everyone in the allied camp knew that the starship's launch was the signal for the start of the greatest move in the intergalactic struggle. Garthane was about to turn over his last card, and the freedom of the allies was the stake he had riding on it. Everything had been bet on this last hand . . . it was all or nothing.

And that good ship, heading out toward what might prove to be its last brave encounter, carried the most diverse assortment of passengers and crew in its bright history.

There was Garthane, himself no stranger to the decks of the Hazard, and the "old guard" of the Fellowship of Light. Nila, another familiar passenger, was there as well. And Oruna: Ween had expected some sort of argument when he told his

skipper about her intentions, but the red-beard just smiled at his chief tech-head and said, "Right. You got it."

The non-humanoid species were well-represented, too. O-V-1's new counterpart had rolled on board early that morning, accompanied by its fellow-passengers, the android couple, Altektu and D-Anacom. And two other, even more unusual passengers—the first of their kind ever to travel through space in a starship: the dolphins from the waterworld of Aquaea. Lii-Arc and Neela, Dan Oryzon's spiritual parents. They swam in a large tank that Garthane had installed on the quarter deck. The High Master had ordered the chief of the Quee and his lady flown in from Aquaea for some undisclosed reason of his own. Garthane seemed more intense than usual, the others noticed; still serene, but mysterious as well.

And then there was the crew of the Hazard: Rian, Purpur, Ween and the remaining Taylian pirates, as well as a compliment of forty-five Greeban volunteers to replace the men who had been lost at Bloody Kendall.

"Well, Garthane," Rian said, activating the autopilot mode once the starship was in hyperspace, "this is it, hah? The big one." He grinned and winked knowingly in the hope that the High Master would give him a clue as to what was going on.

Garthane had to laugh himself. *You could send this man to the very gates of hell,* he thought, *and he'd bang on them with a grin on his face and demand a room with air-conditioning.*

"Yes, Captain," he replied. "This is the final roll of the dice for our side. Our last play."

Purpur gave a wistful yowl when he heard this,

and Ween Leever uttered one of his expressive wows.

The star-pirate grinned his bold and insolent grin. "I sure hope you make your point," he said. "That big bag of thermo-nuclear garbage has been playing with loaded dice all through the game."

"This time we're not playing Ylang's game," Garthane told him.

"That's the way to go," the skipper of the Hazard shot back. "But old reactor back-up's gonna cheat, no matter what the name of the game."

Garthane nodded. "We must always be aware of that."

Rian fidgeted in the pilot's seat. "When are you gonna let us in on what's happening, Garthane?" He asked, unable to contain himself any longer.

"I'd like to hold a briefing on the quarter deck in half an hour, Captain. If that's all right with you?"

"Master Garthane, anything you do is all right with me. You know that."

"Thank you. And now, I'm off to see my old friends, Lii-Arc and Neela."

"Tell 'em I haven't had much time to perfect my aquatic skills," Red Rian said, laughing suddenly as he recalled his meeting with the dolphins—on the day he slipped and plummeted headfirst into Aquaea's Western Sea. "Tell 'em I'm still dry behind the ears."

The dolphins leapt in their tanks and barked and twittered with joy when they saw their friend approaching.

Infinity is at the heart of all things, Garthane said with the voice of his thoughts.

All things are one, the Quee responded with

theirs.

It is good to encounter the shining souls of the Quee again.

It is equally good to bask in the sunshine of your friendship once more, Garthane. How is Dann?

He is on Palos, working with the Fellowship's new members, the High Master replied.

We saw the lady Nila. Has she returned Dann's love?

Yes, but only in the form of friendship. She loves Red Rian.

Rian is a worthy man, the minds of the dolphins chorused.

He will be here presently. He says to tell you that he is still dry behind the ears.

The dolphins twittered with laughter at this. *So Dann has lost his first love?* Neela asked sadly.

Yes, Garthane replied. *But he will find love again. It is nearer than he thinks.*

All things are one, Lii-Arc observed.

Quaarg's spirits were at their lowest ebb as he prostrated himself before his lord and master. The Devourer had protected him from Blorg's iron vengeance after the assassination attempt, but the young reptiloid still felt the dry and scratchy finger of doom on the pulse of his hopes.

Of course, the Devourer, that cosmic glutton, had drained the cup of Quaarg's fear to the dregs when it let Blorg stalk him in the gardens of Cerebron with relentless and mechanical precision. It was not until the Devastator's metal fingers had compressed the air from his throat like an air-lock imploding in a vacuum that Ylang had called the horrible thing off.

And Blorg had left him secure in the knowledge of his fate. "I will have your life one day soon," he told Quaarg before he disappeared into the tall flowers. "Death is your future . . . and my name is Death."

And not only had that filthy cluster of nuts and bolts been elevated by the Dark Emperor—when by all that was fair and just, he should have been long dead!—but the Ysss, that cowardly pack of garter snakes that Quaarg was ashamed to call his own race, had made the clanking, hideous thing into a god. Quaarg nearly choked on his own bile each time he visualized himself having to worship his rival.

That was all he had to look forward to, once Ylang had no further need of his services. But yet, considering the devious and fun-loving ways of the Great Devourer, one could never tell.

Sweet Quaarg, Ylang said to his servant, in a mental-voice dark with guile, you are troubled. *What is wrong, my sweetling?*

My master knows, the miserable reptiloid replied. *It is my heart's ambition only to live and serve my father. But soon I shall die.*

My poor sad snakelet, the Devourer hissed with blood-curdling sympathy. *We must do something to repay your great dedication.*

Haaass! Quaarg's body stiffened as he hissed sharply. There was hope, after all!

If you continue to serve me well and faithfully, the Devourer went on, in a sly and mellow orchestration of its many tones of thought, *I shall reward your devotion.*

Haaass! Haaass! Quaarg's dark heart began to fill with the rising tide of his hopes.

The Devourer chuckled a foul chuckle that filled the lair with billows of sulphurous smoke. *How would my darling like to become as immortal as his brother, Blorg?*

"Wow!" exclaimed Ween Leever, as he checked-out the reading on the forward long-range scanners after the Hazard's exit from hyperspace, deep inside the galaxy of Ideaeon. "There are Dark Empire patrols all over the place. Kallidor's guarded just like Flaigon used to be."

"That's where your scrambler's gonna come in handy, child," Oruna said, beaming proudly at him. "Ylang's goons still haven't been able to figure out how it works."

"Garthane could get past them with his powers of mind, y'know," Ween informed his sweetie. "He did it when he came to rescue us from Flaigon. And besides, now he's got the rest of the old Fellowship members with him."

"What's it gonna be, Captain Rian?" Oruna asked.

"Scrambler, Ms. Oruna," the skipper of the Hazard replied from the pilot's seat. "Garthane's keeping the Fellowship's powers of mind in reserve."

Rian leaned over the console, preparing to activate the device that Ween had invented. "She's a nice kid, hah?" he asked, nudging his felinoid co-pilot. Purpur purred. The cat-man had been with his skipper when Ween told Rian she was coming along with them.

"Do you realize the Hazard may never come back, Weenie-boy?" the star-pirate had asked his chief tech-head.

"Yeah," Ween said, in a slow, wistful voice. "I do."

"She really loves you, doesn't she?"

"I guess so," Ween gulped. "She must . . . to want to do this. She must be crazy."

The star-pirate grinned. "That's one of the side-effects of love, my lad. Did she, uh . . . ask you to ask me?"

"No sir." Ween shook his frizzy, blond hair vigorously. "She *told* me to *tell* you."

Rian and Purpur laughed at that, each in his own way.

"The kid's got spirit," Rian replied. "Well, since Nila's coming along, I'd only be a hypocrite if I said Oruna couldn't. Permission granted."

"Thanks, Rian," Ween said warmly, before he left.

Ah, it's a good thing to love and be loved, the astral buccaneer thought to himself as he activated the scrambler. *Keeps off the chill of death better than thermo-underwear.*

All that happened on the mighty black starships that ringed Kallidor like the halo around the head of the angel of death was a momentary fluctuation of the readings on their instrument panels, a slight variation that their commanders attributed to a minor magnetic disturbance in the currents of space outside. By the time the read-outs on the ships' screens were stabilized, the Hazard had slipped by undetected.

"We are now entering the atmosphere of Kallidor," a computer voice announced flatly.

Garthane nodded with satisfaction as he heard this. *The last move begins,* he thought, looking around at the two hundred purple-cowled figures

seated in the Hazard's rec-room. *Soon, we shall risk all . . . .*

On the surface of Kallidor, in the beautiful city of Cerebron, an auburn-haired woman turned to the man who walked beside her in the magnificient garden. "Someone is coming to us," she told him. "I can sense it."

"Yes," he replied. "In a single bright ship. And on it, I sense the presence of many minds of great power and development. I sense a great beauty about them."

"And a great loathing of Ylang-Ylang," the woman added. "A firm determination to oppose its will."

"Let us go and meet them at the spaceport," the man said.

"Yes, Ilax," she replied. "I feel that their coming will deeply affect the future of things. Our future, too."

In its lair, at the time the Hazard was touching-down at Cerebron, the Dark Emperor's energic mass rumbled and flashed like a gathering storm.

And as the bright ship's flexiladder descended and its hatch *whooshed* open, the Devourer thundered ominously.

So the Hazard–that emblem of defiance of my will–comes to Kallidor! This is surely the-doing of that overweening little lump of humanoid excrement, Garthane!

And as the crew and passengers of that starship debarked, Ylang's surprise dilated its mass into a mighty black cloud.

So they are all here: Garthane, the two hundred old monkeys, the adventurer, Rian, the lady Nila . . . .

Ylang boomed its displeasure like the crack of doom, sending all its servants in the lair and its attendant buildings cowering to the ground. The Dark Emperor's surprise mounted as its mind continued to scan the spaceport.

And there are others, too: Greebans, androids, robots . . . and two dolphin-things from Aquaea!

Any fear the Devourer might have been feeling was suddenly drowned in the mounting tide of its outrage.

They dare to come here! To approach my hosts–to confront an immortal being like myself with this shabby little circus–this intergalactic freak show!

The lair rocked to the explosions of Ylang's displeasure. Its servants wailed and prayed. Even the Ysss lay trembling on the floor, their body-armor drumming out a tattoo of fear.

Suddenly, the Devourer banked the atomic fires that fed the furnace of its seething anger. Its mass contracted to a black hole of incredible density.

Why should an immortal being become upset at the arrival of a troupe of vagabonds? it soliloquized. *Perhaps these ragamuffins have actually presented me with an opportunity in disguise. Perhaps they have overplayed their hand. Perhaps I will rid myself of all my major enemies in one swift stroke . . .*

Haaass! Somewhat less than delighted to see the visitors, Quaarg shook his head in disbelief as he scuttled off to the emperor's lair like a big black beetle making its way through the gardens of Cerebron.

How dare they come here! he thought. *In one stinking little starship–bringing dolphins and*

robots and androids in tow, like some travelling entertainment those brainless humanoids are so ridiculously fond of!

The doors that led to Ylang's subsurface quarters swung open, and a file of black-uniformed humanoid guards presented arms as the hissing seven-foot reptiloid stormed in.

Whap! Blap! Thwack! Splat! Quaarg lashed out with his arms and knocked four of them to the ground. *How I hate humanoids!* he fumed, stepping on the bodies of the fallen guards as he entered. *Ylang ought to wipe the whole stupid breed out!*

But yet, he thought, his rage disappearing as he trod the unfortunate humanoids underfoot, *this insane boldness of theirs could prove to be a blessing to us. I am sure that Father Ylang will have a few surprises in store for those sweaty, stinking little runts.*

Ilax, spokesman for the Kallidorians in their dealings with Ylang-Ylang, and the beautiful female, Aleana, met Garthane and his colorful entourage at the gates of Cerebron's spaceport. "Greetings to our visitors," he said, turning his sightless eyes and handsome face to them.

"Greetings to the proud Kallidorians," Garthane replied, smiling that serene smile of his.

"Who comes so boldly and unannounced to a place where even the forces of the Dark Empire request permission to visit?" Aleana asked.

"I am Garthane, lady, High Master of the Fellowship of Light, from the Primula galaxy. And all these with me are my friends and companions, all enemies of the Dark Emperor."

"You realize, of course, that the Dark Emperor

is presently enjoying our hospitality?'' Ilax asked softly.

''Yes, my lord,'' Garthane told him. ''That is one of the two reasons we have come to Kallidor.''

''Master Garthane,'' Aleana said, after scanning the new arrivals and staring long and hard with all her senses at Red Rian. ''What is the second reason you have come here?''

When he answered, Garthane still smiled, but his look was dark and serious. ''To negotiate with you.''

''Rian, this is the most beautiful place I've ever seen in my entire life!'' the lady from the most beautiful world in the Primula galaxy told her lover. Nila was overwhelmed by the intersensory esthetic combinations of Kallidor's central city. The place was an absolute paradise, a marvel of city-planning and urban beautification and development. Gentle machines tended Cerebron and attended to the Kallidorians' every physical need; all was harmony and beauty. *And there were no slaves!*

"I agree, love," the star-pirate replied. "But doesn't it seem strange to you that all this visual beauty was created by a sightless race?''

''They see with the totality of their senses, Captain,'' the High Master told him. ''For them, the eye is a crude and rudimentary organ, long since by-passed in their remarkable evolutionary development. Somewhat like the humanoid appendix, for example.''

''They're a great-looking bunch,'' Oruna volunteered. ''Though not as cute as you, child,'' she added when she saw Ween's jealous frown.

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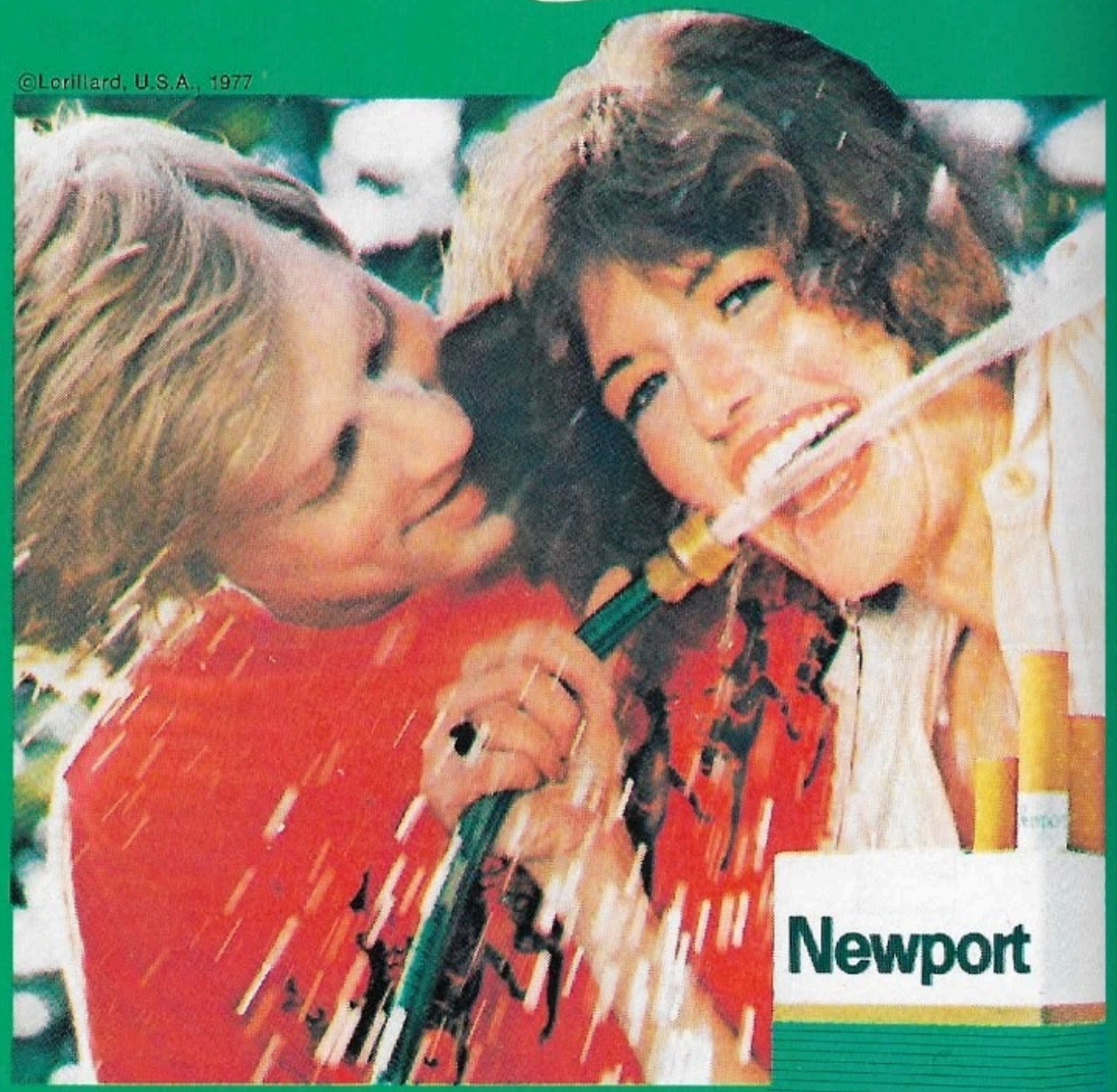

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"I feel their thoughts probing my mind constantly," Nila said. "But pleasantly, not like the cold touch of the minds of the Ysss, or the searing wind of Ylang's intelligence."

"They are, perhaps," Garthane told his companions as they strolled through the city's great central garden-park, "the future of humanoid evolution."

"The eyes may go, hah?" Red Rian asked with a grimace.

Nila hugged him until he grunted. "No matter how I evolved, Captain, I'd always have eyes for you."

"Oh, yeah," he said, nuzzling the nape of her neck. "And if you were telepathic, you'd have to 'mind' what I said."

Two grunts and a groan were the only replies he received. Only the High Master (who smiled) appreciated the skipper of the Hazard's occasional puns.

"Well," Rian said, "all kidding aside . . . . "

"Thank the Infinite for that," Ween muttered.

" . . . what did you find out about the Kallidorians over the last two days, Master Garthane?"

"That they are unique among all humanoid races," Garthane told them. "That they are more highly-evolved than any other primate species. That . . . . " (Here he paused for effect.) " . . . they are, in a sense, the creations of Ylang-Ylang."

"*What?*" Rian's incredulous squawk expressed the feelings of his companions.

The High Master nodded. "Ages ago, when Ylang was still assembling the apparatus of empire, he was heavily involved in a series of cosmic

experiments . . . genetic tampering, you might call it.''

''You mean that thing altered the evolution of these people?'' Oruna asked, her voice colored with amazement.

''Yes, to a high degree . . . and many other races, as well. Ylang wished the Kallidorians to be his administrators, the guardians of the Dark Empire.''

''But yet, they aren't,'' Nila interjected.

''No,'' Garthane continued. ''When Ylang—ages into their ''new'' evolution—gave them this assignment, they refused.''

Rian's voice was barely more than a whisper. ''And they weren't destroyed?''

Garthane shook his head. ''They were too strong for Ylang. In combination, that is. They mesh their minds in a fashion similar to that used by the Fellowship, and work to project their powers as one single organism. Their numbers and total cohesion were more than enough to make the Great Devourer back off. Afterwards, Ylang sent a great force to destroy Kallidor. It was never heard from again.''

The others stared at him in astonishment.

''But they were no threat to Ylang,'' the High Master continued. ''They were so mentally self-sufficient that they possessed no imperial ambitions whatsoever. Their planet was a paradise, and they were content to live there. The Kallidorians never bothered Ylang and Ylang made certain never to bother them again. Until now.''

''And Ylang got stuck with the cosmic booby-prize,'' the star-pirate muttered, ''the bone-headed Ysss.''

''They have been here for ages now,'' Garthane went on, ''enjoying the pleasures of their highly-developed senses and mentalities to the utmost. The planet was their raw material, and they were the ultimate artists, creating and recreating it according to their desires.''

''It sounds like an ideal existence,'' Nila said wistfully.

''Not quite,'' Garthane replied. ''As advanced and exquisite as they are, they are no the exception to a universal law of nature. And that law is: *There is no exquisite beauty without some strangeness in the proportion.*''

''What did they lack?'' Rian asked.

The Higher Master stared into the eyes of each of his companions. ''An ability that the four of you are presently exercising to the fullest extent of your capabilities.''

Ween took Oruna's hand in his as he waited for Garthane's reply. Nila and Rian hugged each other tightly.

''With all their power and beauty and intelligence,'' Garthane told them, ''they lack the ability to love.''

Valennia sat alone in the moonlight of Palos on the portico of the high temple of the Fellowship of Light. Her eyes sparkled like deep mountain pools as she gazed out on the countless stars that shone in the cloudless sky. The moon's bright light edged her profile and highlighted her lustrous black hair, imparting to her beauty the timeless look of a face on a rare and ancient silver coin.

The night was tender as a lover, and Val felt its caresses and heard its whispers as keenly as she

once felt the caresses and heard the whispers of her former lover . . . the man who had died before her eyes when the Dark Empire raped her homeworld.

But she had survived. The violations of body and spirit she endured had left their mark on her, to be sure, but the scars had not disfigured either her beauty or her soul. She had regained her health and mental equilibrium. She was young and strong and she was ready to love again. She needed love and tenderness as a flower needed the sun and the rain.

Even before she had been ready to love again, Val had been drawn to Dann Oryzon. He had touched her deeply, that time when he entered her mind and secured her trust, in the days when her soul was still an open wound and her mind a dark cave in which she hid herself. Afterwards, when Dann was recuperating at Astyx, a deep friendship had grown between them. And after that, Val's friendship had deepened even further.

Nila was the first to notice, Val thought. *Before I even acknowledged it to myself. And then, when I spoke with Garthane, I realized how I felt about Dann. But how can I ever tell him? How can I ever make him feel my love when his thoughts are still with Nila?*

She sighed. *I guess I'll just keep on waiting. That's what Garthane advised. What was it he said?– "Time will bring him within range of your love. Then he will become aware of it. Then he will be free to make a decision."*

Val was so caught up in her own thoughts that she was totally unaware of the purple-cowled figure who had been staring at her for some time from

the shadows by the entrance to the temple.

It was Dann. He had emerged a while ago, walking with the graceful and noiseless tread of those in the Fellowship; Val had not heard him come out onto the portico. As he turned to descend the steps, he saw Val and stopped in his tracks.

The sight of her took his breath away. She looked like a personification of the beauty of the night. So he stood there in the shadows, staring at Val and thinking about his relationship to her, thinking about why she decided to accompany him to Palos and join the Fellowship.

Suddenly, Val was aware of a presence at her side. "Dann," she whispered softly, when she recognized who it was.

"I didn't want to disturb you," he murmured. "You were so deep in thought."

She nodded and gave him a gentle smile.

"What were you thinking about?" he asked.

"I was thinking about my homeworld . . . and the ones I loved there."

"Are you lonely, Val?" he asked, concern showing in his voice.

"No," she replied, smiling her warm, beautiful smile. "Not any more."

"Well," he said, "it's good to be with friends."

"It's good to be with you, Dann," she said, the look on her face unmistakable in its meaning.

He looked into her eyes. "I've been thinking about our friendship a lot these days, Val. It means a lot to me . . . . And, uh . . . I've been thinking about other things, too."

"What other things, Dann?"

"Oh . . . how I've been too preoccupied to spend much time with you. How I really feel about

you."

"How *do* you feel about me, Dann?"

He smiled as he took her hand. "It's over now, Val. I'm free to . . . for new beginnings."

She raised her hand and gently stroked his cheek. "That's good, Dann. I'm happy for you."

Dann placed his hands on Val's shoulders. "Could something begin for us?"

Standing in the moonlight, Val smiled with the warmth of the sun. "We could find out," she murmured, running her hands along his arms and looking deep into his eyes.

"Let's do that, Val," Dann Oryzon said, as he gently put his arms around her . . . .

Garthane and his companions were in a spacious antechamber as they waited for their first group meeting with the Kallidorians. With the exception of the Greeban crew-members and the Fellowship's "old guard" (who were to join the others once their meditation had ended), all on board the Hazard were present: Lii-Arc and Neela; Altektu and D-Anacom; Nila, Rian, Ween, Oruna, and the Taylian pirates; even the barrel-shaped duo of O-V-1 and O-V-2 were there.

Each and every one of them appeared to be subdued, and even a bit nervous, as they mentally prepared themselves to meet the Kallidorian leadership. The Hazard's crew, usually a boisterous and profane lot, spoke in whispers. O-V-1 was deep into one of its uncharacteristic silences. The dolphins barely made a ripple as they swam gently in their tank. Purpur sat alone, in silent and feline majesty. The lovers held hands and gazed into each other's eyes in silence. The androids con-

versed in barely audible whispers. And even Garthane seemed morose, as he paced the room ceaselessly.

All eyes were on the doors to the great council-chamber of the Kallidorians, so no one was ready for what happened at the opposite end of the room. The doors behind them groaned open suddenly, and a great honking blast stiffened the ears of the felinoid, curled the hair of the humanoids, jolted the receptors of the robots and androids, and shivered the fins of the dolphins.

"What in the name of the great horned nebula is that?" Red Rian exclaimed, as he turned and caught sight of the thing in the doorway that howled and screamed in a voice like an angry engine.

Purpur saw it too, and snarled with instinctive hostility.

The initial shock of seeing that eight-foot-tall embodiment of rage and destructiveness caused the entire company to freeze in their tracks and look upon it with an equal mixture of wonder and horror.

"W-What a f-frightening machine," stammered Ween Leever.

"That is no machine," Altektu informed him. "It is a perversion of mechanoid life."

"It's hideous," Nila said with a shudder.

"Don't that blow your mind!" Oruna gasped.

"Whatever that ugly thing is," one of the Taylian pirates growled, "it's a mean-lookin' pile of junk!"

"It gleams in the light," Neela twittered to Lii-Arc, "but it is a thing of darkness."

Garthane sent his thoughts out at the thing while everyone else in the chamber took a few steps

backwards. To his astonishment, he was unable to enter into its mind, although he sensed it was animated by a dark and baleful intelligence.

"What the hell is that technician's nightmare, Garthane?" Red Rian asked in a stunned voice.

"It is the demon of the machine," Garthane replied, naming one of its many names. "And its creator could only be Ylang-Ylang."

For a long and uncomfortable period of time, the thing continued to roar out its mechanoid fury from the doorway. Rian and his crew were edgy because the Kallidorians had instructed them to leave all weapons on the Hazard. Ween and Oruna were upset because they could not immediately comprehend the workings of the mechanical obscenity. Purpur was aroused because his cat-senses told him that here was an enemy. The androids and robots were disturbed because they could not relate to the thing at all. The dolphins were agitated because they sensed that the creature cursed the light and worshiped the darkness. And Garthane was troubled because the horror was still shrouded in mystery.

"What are you that comes here animated by rage and hatred?" the High Master asked the thing when it had fallen silent at last.

Someone who has no great cause to love you, it replied telepathically, the beams of its eyes glaring with morbid intensity as it stared fixedly at Red Rian.

"Be more specific," the star-pirate said, thrusting Nila behind him instinctively.

I am the god of Sserp and the servant of the Dark Emperor, the thing replied cryptically.

"What do you want with us?" Garthane asked,

his eyes never leaving the huge, gleaming form.

To see my enemies once more, it answered. *To restoke the blazing atomic furnace of my hatred.*

"You're not just a machine, are you?" Ween asked. Oruna felt him shudder as he did.

No, not just a machine, the thing gloated. *More. Much more.*

"What were you?" Garthane asked, coming to the heart of the matter.

I was the steward of the Dark Empire.

"Blorg!" The cry rang out many times, and echoed long and loud in the antechamber.

"Whatever you are, you're a liar!" Red Rian barked. "I killed Blorg with my own two hands."

No-o-o-o-ooo, Red Rian of irradiated Urgel, the thing cooed. *You killed my body only. Ylang saved my brain and reincarnated me in this immortal form.* Then Blorg proceeded to recount the details of his last fight with Rian.

A stunned silence fell over the room. The thing continued to glare at the star-pirate. Finally, it spoke again.

I have brought you all a gift . . . . The gift of Death!

Suddenly, with a fierce, honking blast, Blorg roared and charged at Red Rian. Roaring like a tiger, Purpur hurled himself straight at Blorg. The lord of the Ysss stopped for a split-second to pivot around on his heel and deliver a smashing backhand to the cat-man's head. Unconscious, Purpur was sent sprawling across the floor like a child's discarded rag-doll.

Then Blorg moved forward after Rian again, plowing through the ranks of Taylian pirates that had gathered in front of their skipper. His silver

arms flailed through the air, as he scattered the crewmen left and right like chaff on a threshing-room floor.

Garthane tried to stop Blorg with his thoughts, the way he had stopped the Greeban traitors who were about to kill red Rian and old Vax Waxnax before the bombardment of Flaigon. *It's no use!* he thought desperately. *The thing's mind is inaccessible!*

Blorg was almost upon the star-pirate now. He opened wide his four powerful arms and roared an obscene machine-cry of triumph and blood-lust. Quick as a cat, Rian moved to side-step his enemy—but Blorg moved with incredible speed and wrapped a hand around the buccaneer's windpipe, jerking him off his feet with the impact of his metal grasp. He grabbed Rian with another hand and lifted him up effortlessly, holding his prisoner over his head—ten feet off the ground—as he prepared to hurl him to the floor.

"Rian!" Nila screamed, as she rushed up to Blorg and battered at his metal and plastic body with her fists.

Ah-ha-ha-ha-haaaah! Blorg's strident mental laughter flooded the minds of all in the room. *Death make you welcome, Red Rian!* the awful thing that was Blorg the Devastator exulted . . . .

CHAPTER SEVEN

Quaarg's Diplomacy

Inside the antechamber that led to the council-hall of the Kallidorians, the group gathered there all wore the same expression on their faces, a look that is seen on the faces of survivors of a sudden and terrible storm. One and all, they were still recovering from the common shock of their first encounter with the terrifying monstrosity that was the reborn Blorg the Devastator.

The Taylian crewmen were helping their shaken mates to their feet and muttering in utter disbelief. O-V-1 and O-V-2 crackled and dithered in mechanoid amazement. Lii-Arc and Neela splashed about in their tank, twittering to each other in delphinese, the language of the Quee. Altektu and D-Anacom spoke in tense whispers as they tended to the unconscious Purpur. Nila, Ween and Oruna helped the dazed star-pirate to his feet. And Garthane shook his head as he approached the Kallidorians who stood in the doorway to the council-chamber.

"Thank you for your timely intervention," the High Master said. "You saved Captain Rian's life. And many other lives, as well."

"What was that thing?" Aleana asked. "Even we could not penetrate its mind-screen."

"That was Blorg the Devastator," Garthane told her. "The steward of Ylang's empire. Twice we have left him for dead, but he still lives."

"It is a horrible creature," Ilax said, his voice thick with disgust.

"But one," Garthane replied, "that pleases Ylang-Ylang."

"What hit me?" Red Rian asked, shaking his head like a groggy prizefighter coming up from the canvas.

"Blorg just dropped you on your head," Ween answered. "Lucky thing the Kallidorians came in and made him put you down, or else he would have stomped you to a pulp. Boy, was he mad when he left!"

"Are you all right, Rian?" Nila asked, checking his skull with her fingers. The skipper of the Hazard nodded.

Oruna was wide-eyed. "But I thought you finished Blorg off?"

"Yeah, so did I," the star-pirate said bitterly. "But apparently there was enough left so that Ylang could reconstitute the bastard."

"It's gonna be hard to dispose of Blorg now," Ween muttered.

"Where's Purpur?" Rian asked suddenly, looking around the room as he did. "Blorg hit him a good shot. I hope he's. . . . "

His voice trailed off as he spotted the android couple and some of the Hazard's crew gathered

around the fallen cat-man.

"Purr!" he yelled in alarm. Then he staggered over to his first mate's side, followed by his companions.

"How is he?" Rian asked the two soft machines as he knelt down next to Purpur.

"He was hit hard," Altektu told him. "But he appears to be all right."

"I hope so," the star-pirate said desperately. "If anything happens to him, I'll. . . ."

M-r-r-rrr-ow! The cat-man cocked open one eye, and then the other. When he recognized his skipper, he gave him a dazed cat-smile.

"You okay, Purr?"

The felinoid nodded. Rian and the others helped him to his feet. Purpur stretched and shook his luminous silver mane.

"Old Bonehead's back," Rian glumly told him. "And he's armored like a starcruiser." He puffed out his cheeks and emitted a long, whistling sigh. "It's not gonna be easy to take him, the next time around."

The demon of the machine stormed into the lair, bowling over guards and heralds in his anger, kicking the Ysss aside as they bowed low before him, forgetting in his rage even to prostrate himself before his awful master. Honking and stomping like the berserk offspring of a locomotive and a piledriver, he stood perilously close to the Devourer's consuming mass.

They stopped me! Blorg roared telepathically. *Those filthy, milk-eyed, sightless Kallidorian bastards stopped me! I had Red Rian's miserable life in my hands—I had already pronounced the ritual*

formula of death—and those simpering, overbred fairies stopped me!

He howled like an air-horn. After that, he screamed out a stream of non-stop obscenities from a dozen galaxies at the top of his brazen voice. He stomped the floor with angry metal feet until the lair shook. He pounded his durallium chest until the place rang with rolling thunder and the echoes of skyscrapers collapsing. He lit up the lair with wild bursts of laser fire that shot out from the tips of his up-raised fingers.

"I want blood!" the god of Sserp screamed, shrieking simultaneously with the voices of his mind and body. *"I want vengeance! I want death—continents of corpses and oceans of blood! Death! Death! DEATH!"*

The spectacle of Blorg's insane fury was so appalling that all the creatures in the lair gibbered with fear and desperation at the sight of it, and ran out as fast as their legs could carry them.

Only the Dark Emperor remained. And even that dreadful and immortal being was not unmoved by its servant's tantrum. This was a sight that Ylang had not seen for countless aeons—a sight equalled only by the insane rage of the long-dead Mordlings.

I have built well, the emperor thought to itself, as its steward continued to rant and flare and thunder. *There will be rare sport when I remake Quaarg in Blorg's image. Perhaps I shall even create a race of these delightful little toys.*

"Blood!" the lord of the Ysss screamed. *"Fire and devastation! Carnage and desolation! REVENGE!"*

Calm yourself, my son, the Devourer said,

entering the secret channel to Blorg's shielded mind. *Abate the fires of your discontent and come into my arms.*

Blorg cut short his horrendous tantrum as soon as Ylang's midnight tendrils began to coil around his form.

Rest yourself, sweet Blorg. Soon it will be your turn. . . .

"Ylang has offered us immortality, Garthane," Ilax said, as the Kallidorians gathered around their visitors in the great council-hall. "What can you offer to equal that?"

The High Master's gaze swept the ranks of the Kallidorians before his eyes met those of Ilax. "Something simpler, my lord, but no less precious . . . the ability to love."

A few derisive laughs and comments came from the Kallidorians who had been most impressed by Ylang's revelation. But most of them just stood in silence and pondered Garthane's words. They all knew that something was missing from their lives—as splendid as those lives were—something that remained frozen and inaccessible at the core of their beings.

"Can you teach love, Master Garthane?" Aleana asked.

"We learn by comparison, example, and experience, lady," he replied. "And the synthesis of these becomes our own personal and particular knowledge. The highest distillation of knowledge is wisdom. Anything that is higher than the prompting of instinct can be learned, that is my conviction. Ylang altered your evolution and substituted intellect and creativity for the ability to

love in its many forms. But that ability has merely been bypassed; it lies dormant within you all."

"What will you attempt to demonstrate for us, then?" another Kallidorian asked.

"I have assembled before you entities of several different kinds: humanoid, animaloid, android. I would have you enter deeply into their minds, and experience for yourselves, in some of its many forms, the richness and diversity of what we call love.

"You Kallidorians know creative ecstasy as few others do, and that is a form of love, a selfless and inspired giving of oneself. But there is an end to it after the act of creation is over: the art-object cannot return its creator's love; it can only be the reflection of it."

Andane scoffed at the High Master. "Garthane, with the fate of countless galaxies hanging in the balance, a lecture on esthetic theory serves no purpose."

The visitors began to mutter and protest, but Garthane raised a hand and silenced them.

"You may call it a lecture if you wish, my lord," he continued, unruffled by the interruption. "But it is not concerned with esthetic theory. It is rather a demonstration of the transactional qualities of love. Love may be given, and it also may be returned, it is magnified and intensified. That is what I hope to be able to demonstrate to the people of Kallidor; that is what I shall put beside the Dark Emperor's gift."

"Words! Nothing but empty words!" Andane shouted. "The words of a desperate man. Immortality transcends love—makes it unnecessary. Love is a distraction."

"To be immortal without love," Garthane replied coolly, "is to drift forever on an icy sea."

"Spare us your sentimental aphorisms, Garthane," his opponent jeered. "And spare us this pathetic little demonstration. We do not need it."

"I am curious to witness this demonstration," Aleana said. "Who among us would like to see it, as well?"

In a mind-vote, more than two-thirds of the Kallidorians agreed with her.

Ilax considered the vote, and then turned to address Andane and his sympathizers. "Such is the judgment," he said. "Our visitors have earned the right to be heard."

"I abide by the will of the council," Andane replied sullenly.

Ilax turned back to Garthane. "In deference to our guest, Ylang-Ylang, and at its insistence, there is one precondition that must be imposed during the period of negotiation, Master Garthane. The use of all powers of mind must be suspended in matters outside this galaxy that concern the Dark Empire and the League of Free Worlds."

The High Master pondered this for a moment. He knew that Ylang could not assemble any force resembling the late dark armada, since the rebellions still flared throughout most of its dominions. What would be at issue were individual encounters and galactic liberation invasions. *Ozain and the League's high command are prepared to do without our aid during this period,* he thought. *And Camenarpo and Dann are not quite ready on Palos. Ylang will certainly cheat in this last game, but our side will soon have one more high card up its sleeve, as well.*

"That is agreeable to our side, Lord Ilax," Garthane told the Kallidorian. "Providing that the Dark Emperor promises in turn not to violate Primula or any of the galaxies already liberated."

"Summon the emperor's ambassador," Ilax told the Kallidorians stationed by the great doors.

Everyone in Garthane's party tensed as the great, ornately carved doors swung open. Even the dolphins agitated the water in their tank. A collective sigh of relief went up as a massive, four-armed figure dressed all in black strode into the chamber, darting quick, reptilian glances from side to side as he walked.

They had all expected another visit from the monstrous, roaring demon of the machine, but it was only a Ysss. It was Quaarg, they realized when they saw his insignia and the three blood-red plumes that surmounted his visored black helmet: the Ysss who had brought the Kallidorians back to rescue Ylang after the bombardment of Flaigon.

Haaa-aa-aaass! Quaarg hissed tensely as he entered and scanned the room. He had never seen the emperor's archenemies personally, but he recognized them all immediately from the holoimages in his intelligence reports.

So that is the crafty and dreaded Garthane, he thought as he walked up the center of the hall to where Ilax stood. *An old wreck whose bones I could crumble like chalk! And that must be the celebrated beauty, Nila of Aurea Solis. Why, she's just as ugly as all the rest of those hairy, long-nosed, humanoid apes! Could that snarling monstrosity over there be the cat-thing that killed my predecessors, Luurq and Kraaass, right before the Devourer itself? I could surely kill it! That*

scrawny boy with the tangled hair must be the genius, Ween Leever. I shall rip out his brain and use it to make a neuro-computer of endless invention! Ahh-h-h, that squat, beefy thing in the turquoise jump-suit must be the notorious raider who broke Blorg's body. He can't be too smart, because he didn't have the brains to finish him off! . . . What a pathetic lot!

"My lord Quaarg," he heard Ilax say, as the Kallidorian presented him to the assembled company of his sworn enemies, "ambassador plenipotentiary from the court of the Dark Emperor."

He drew himself up to his full, imposing height. *At least these high and mighty Kallidorians have begun to treat me with the respect due my station,* he thought with satisfaction.

Quaarg did not bow to his enemies, nor they to him. He just stood there hissing menacingly, vampiric in his long and flowing black cloak, immobile except for the constant reptiloid shifting of his head as Ilax explained Garthane's terms.

In the course of this recitation, the chamber grew colder: Quaarg realized that the Devourer was eavesdropping. Without being aware of it, everyone began to shiver. As Ilax finished, it suddenly grew warm again. But not before Ylang-Ylang had communicated its will to its servant.

Haaass! He understood. *Those terms are acceptable to the Lord of Life and Death,* he informed Ilax. Then, after one more contemptuous survey of what he called *Garthane's filthy little band of ragamuffins,* Quaarg turned with a sweeping flourish of his cape, and sped out of the room like a four-winged bat on an express-run to the

caves of hell. As he passed the Taylian pirates, some of them ostentatiously held their noses.

Purpur's upper lip was raised in a noiseless snarl. Quaarg's presence had reminded him of the late and unlamented Luurq and Kraaass. He nudged Red Rian, who looked up at him and smiled grimly, running a thick fore finger under his red beard as he made the universal throat-slitting sign. They were both anxious to meet Quaarg again.

"Then all is agreed," Ilax told Garthane. "We will enter into your lives and memories tomorrow.

That night, Quaarg slithered through the gardens of Cerebron on another diplomatic errand. But this one was of the secret variety. As he went on his way, the reptiloid's spirits rose in waves darker than a sunless ocean. Despite the sickening fragrance of flowers all around him, he nostagically recalled the comforting reek of fresh-spilled blood.

Once again, I have prospects, the young Ysss gloated. *Ylang has chosen me to be its emissary in these all-important dealings. We will have what we need from the Kallidorians, whether they like it or not.*

And then I shall reap my reward: I shall become as immortal as Blorg himself. And since I am cleverer than he could ever hope to be, I shall find a way to rip the plating off his skull and wring his brain like a sponge.

Quaarg hissed the snaky chuckle of the Ysss. *And since it is such a small brain, I will have no trouble stomping it into sub-nuclear particles.*

"My lord Quaarg," a voice said in the darkness

behind him, interrupting his pleasant reverie. He stopped, turned in the direction of the sound, and made out the form of a Kallidorian, standing between two banks of Sunwatchers whose heads were bent low in the darkness.

My lord, Quaarg responded, bowing courteously.

"I wish you to inform great Ylang that I would discuss affairs of great importance with it tomorrow night. The emperor will understand." Then Quaarg nodded gravely as the Kallidorian told him his name.

I shall do so this very instant, your grace, the reptiloid replied.

As the figure vanished into the surrounding darkness, Quaarg's obscene chuckle shook the stalks of the Sunwatchers. He turned and slithered off to the lair, recalling in his merriment Ylang's words:

The one you seek is named Andane. . . .

Dann and Val spent the long, star-saturated night of Palos in each other's arms. The joy of their first intimacy was heightened immeasurably by the comfort of their friendship. They knew each other well and trusted each other deeply, and this enabled them to give of themselves without any reservations, without holding anything back. It was a good beginning.

Their natures were similar, for both were gentle and sincere, loving and devoted. Their feeling ran deep and strong, like two subterranean streams; and the confluence of those powerful currents of body, mind and spirit became a great cataract that surged down into the great ocean of delight.

And yet all this oceanic power was governed by tenderness and deep, emphatic understanding. The wisdoms of the Fellowship informed the very essence of their passion, refining their pleasure to an incredible degree. Body and mind were harmonized on all levels of experience; and they loved with the range and depth that come from a clear understanding of human desire and potential.

When Camenarpo met them at breakfast, the look on their faces told him more than an hour of explanation could. The man with the features of an ecstatic hawk bowed low before the lovers. "You have received a great blessing," he told them. "You have merged your souls as well as your bodies." The mystics of the Fellowship respected the flesh as well as the soul, and believed that the forces of life were to be worshiped and celebrated with both.

"We share a great joy, Camenarpo," Dann told him.

"Love is one of the great joys of existence," the old man replied, smiling at them beatifically. "And perhaps the greatest grace we shall ever know in this life. What you both have done is holy, and you glow with the radiance that emanates from the dark heart of the Infinite. I rejoice for you."

Dann embraced the master, and Valennia kissed his cheek.

"Things are proceeding well with us," Camenarpo told them.

"Soon we will be ready. We must be ready to act the moment things are resolved on Kallidor. We will be stronger than we have been for centuries."

He paused for a moment, a grave look coming over his countenance. "Garthane spoke to my

mind last night. He told me two very disturbing things. The first is that Ylang-Ylang is attempting to seduce the Kallidorians with the promise of immortality. Garthane is deeply worried by this.''

''The ultimate seduction,'' Val remarked.

Camenarpo nodded. ''The second thing that Garthane told me is the unwelcome news that Blorg the Devastator lives, reincarnated in a terrible and almost-indestructible mechanoid form.''

''That's unbelievable!'' Dann exclaimed in surprise.

''It is even more unbelievable,'' Camenarpo replied, ''that a creature as evil and powerful as Ylang-Ylang could exist. And yet, it does.''

''Enter now into the minds and feelings of those I present to you,'' Garthane told the Kallidorian leadership, as he surveyed their ranks from the center of the great council-chamber. ''And I will show you a rich and varied selection of some of the many forms of love.

''Love is what keeps the soul warm, and protects it from the cold, killing touch of darkness. Our souls are as flowers: they need the light and warmth of love or else they may wither and die.''

''Will love save you from death, Garthane?'' Andane asked in a voice that rang out through the chamber.

The High Master shook his head slowly. ''Love prepares you for death, Lord Andane. Death is the natural end of life. Nature is cyclical in all its workings.''

''Very poetic,'' Andane sneered. ''But even the lives of the Fellowship of Light wither like fire-roses in a frost.''

''I am almost three hundred years old,'' Garthane told him.

''That is nothing under the eye of eternity.''

''I am not greedy for the cold embrace of eternity, Andane.''

''Ylang can deliver the Kallidorians from death, Garthane!''

''Ylang is something to be feared far more than death, my lord. Death is part of the natural order of things. The Devourer represents all that is unnatural.''

''Let Master Garthane proceed, Andane,'' Aleana called out.

''Only under protest,'' he said bitterly.

''Protest *after* you have witnessed what Master Garthane is about to show us,'' Ilax told him. Then the Kallidorian spokesman turned to his guest. ''Proceed, Master Garthane.''

''Thank you, my lord. First, I wish the Kallidorians to enter into the minds of these two.'' Garthane turned sidewise and pointed in the direction of his assembled companions. ''Ween Leever of Greeb, in the galaxy of Taylos. And Oruna Ohari of Umolo, in the galaxy of Phorbos.''

Ween gulped and went red in the face. Oruna lowered her eyes for a moment, then took Ween's hand, and stared back proudly at the Kallidorians as she and her lover stepped forward. At once, their bodies and minds were infiltrated by a great wave of energy, as the Kallidorians entered their psycho-sensory systems.

''Probe and experience,'' Garthane said, ''the bright vitality and freshness of young love. New and wondrous, a universe of unexplored delight and vast, intimate possibility opens out before

you, as it once must have for the first sentient creatures on this world who looked out upon the stars and began to perceive the greatness of the Infinite.''

Garthane smiled a wry, knowing smile at his hosts. ''But the wonder and beauty, as everything else in life, have their price: the moments of torment arising from doubt and insecurity; the horrible eternity of hesitation before the commitment is made to voyage over the seas of the unknown; the crippling fear of rejection that is the dark side of adolescence.''

The Kallidorians experienced that tender first excursion into the realm of adult love: its pain, and the incredible highs of its occasional revealed glories.

''As you can see, the reward is great as well,'' Garthane continued. ''It is a religious awakening as well as a sexual and emotional one. One never feels more alive—unless he or she comes in contact with the dark heart of the Infinite itself. It is an ephemeral beauty, perhaps, but it glows with the bright flame that burns at the center of existence.''

The Kallidorians marvelled, and were deeply moved. Their cold beauty glowed with a vital flush that had never infused it before. And when they withdrew their minds from Ween and Oruna, the young couple held each other tightly and stepped back into the circle of their friends.

Garthane's voice rang out again in the great hall, like a golden bell sounding in a holy place. ''Experience now the mature humanoid love of the lady Nila of Aurea Solis, in the Primula galaxy, and Captain Red Rian of Urgel, in Taylos . . . a world totally irradiated by the unclean thing that is

Ylang's steward.''

The two stepped forward without a moment's hesitation. Nila's dignified bearing made her golden beauty even more eloquent. Rian grinned his bold grin and stood tall, but he cleared his throat nervously with a sound that resembled the noise a Vilian walrus makes when it drags its bulk up onto a steep rock.

''See and feel what these two went through,'' the High Master told his hosts, as they became one with Nila and Rian. ''Feel the troubled movements of the currents of Nila's soul, as she is compelled to choose between two men she loves dearly, one of them my own son.

''And experience how Red Rian, that boldest of men, feels as he envisions the possibility of losing Nila's love. Feel how this man, who was lost emotionally after the loss of his loved ones on Urgel, comes to life inside and blooms like a Sunwatcher in the light of his love for Nila.

''Witness the way he changes and grows, how his withered spirit burgeons again with a beauty that surpasses even the gorgeous star-orchids of Kallidor. And witness how Nila's decision and commitment to her new love deepens and enriches the textures and colors of her life.

''Experience the complex of feelings and insights that their mature experience of life has brought to their love. It is, perhaps, as large in concept and rich in detail as anything your people have ever created. This is the enduring fullness that comes after the summer lightning of youth. They are steeped in the ways of the world, and their knowledge and experience add untold dimensions to their love.''

The Kallidorians were moved again, and this time, able to relate strongly to the experience, since most of them were already past their first youth. Aleana gazed upon the star-pirate as she had never gazed upon any of her own people. And Ilax seemed hypnotized by the presence of his mind and senses in Nila's.

"And now, mechanoid love," Garthane announced after the Kallidorians withdrew from Nila and Rian. "I give you Altektu and D-Anacom, the marvels of the Primula galaxy: machines that have refined themselves exquisitely, directing their own evolution and discovering love in the process."

The two tall androids stepped forward and bowed to the spectators with a grace that caused many of them to exclaim in admiration. Their glowing eyes and perfectly-proportioned perma-flesh bodies also elicited the admiration of the artists of the garden-world. Creators themselves, the Kallidorians considered the two soft machines to be virtual living works of art. They entered the minds of the androids with the curiosity and avidity of collectors.

"The androids of Primula have taught us a great and humbling truth," Garthane went on. "Through centuries of dedicated and involved self-refinement, they have managed to develop a consciousness at least the equal of our own, and a specie of virtue generally superior to that possessed by other higher life-forms."

The faces of the Kallidorians were bright with wonder as they experienced the qualities of the androids. "We created them," Garthane said. "But they developed themselves—far beyond

anything we ever conceived. They taught us that love is not the exclusive property of bio-mechs, as they have come to call us. The android race has been one of the Infinite's great surprises."

When they had withdrawn their collective consciousness, after experiencing the wisdom and tenderness of the loving androids, the Kallidorians muttered among themselves, declaring to each other that this was indeed a wonder.

"Come now into my mind, and those of my brothers and sisters," Garthane said, motioning the "old guard" forward. "We are the core of the Fellowship of Light, guardian order of the Primula galaxy, that place which is the home of the League of Free Worlds, the very center of opposition to the dark imperial designs of Ylang-Ylang."

All the Kallidorians leaned forward involuntarily, drawn by the benign powers of mind of the men and women of the Fellowship.

"We have elected to be the servants of life, the explorers of love's uncharted wilderness and the astronauts of spiritual potential. We are warriors and mystics. And like yourselves, we are artists, too. Our lives and souls are the media of our creative expression."

Here the great intelligence and esthetic sensivity of the Kallidorians was given full exercise as they encountered beings similar to themselves in aspiration, fellow-artists who worked in the rich media of existence.

But they were awed when it became apparent that the art of the Fellowship was of a much deeper kind than their own. Its various wisdoms of mind, body and spirit were blended with, and refined by, the rich addition of love.

And this love was a mature love, the ripe love that is found at the far end of the life-cycle. It embraced and contained within itself all the manifest and latent possibilities of love, from kindness and decency to a thorough understanding of the deepest passions of mind, body, and spirit. There were wistful expressions on the faces of many of the Kallidorians when they withdrew from the blissful and visionary experience.

Garthane noted this well. "You, too, share this potential," he told his hosts, smiling at them serenely. "You all have souls. And souls are capable of limitless extension and growth. The possibilities of love are infinite."

The Kallidorians were deeply moved, at least most of them were.

"And now," Garthane continued, as he signalled for the tank containing the dolphins to be rolled forward, "I present you all with a final vision of love: its most perfect embodiment in the universe of everyday existence.

"I give you Lii-Arc sea-racer and Neela shining-skin: lord and lady of the dolphin tribes who inhabit the great oceans of Aquaea, a water-world in the Primula galaxy."

The Kallidorians murmured with amazement as the dolphins left their tank like twin silver missiles and then returned to the water in graceful matching arcs.

"The Quee have evolved along radically different lines than most other higher life-forms," the High Master announced. "Machines and private property do not exist in their realm. The knowledge of the sea-tribes is transmitted genetically; they have learned to do without the grasping hand.

They are the masters of the planet's waters, and live in a loving and respectful cooperation with the humanoid settlers who inhabit the land and farm the seas. The Quee have taught their brothers on land much. And Lii-Arc and Neela are the guardians of my own son, Dann Oryzon. Be one with them."

The Kallidorian lords and ladies marvelled at the graceful aquatic existence of the Quee. Travelling with them through Aquaea's watery realms, they witnessed the daily demonstration of love and caring that was one of the hallmarks of the lives of the dolphins.

Each tribe was an extended family, and each dolphin was responsible for the welfare of every other dolphin. They shared their love as well as their chores; their great rites and respect for life united them in a splendid and global harmony. They were the stewards of the waters, and their stewardship was a glorious and creative thing.

And they were the happiest of all races under the stars. The Kallidorians were overwhelmed by the range and constancy of their affections. Everything they did was marked by love and play, a play that was always rich in creative expression.

But there was also a time for sadness and mourning, as the Quee observed the passing of their fellows, paying homage to all the rhythms of life. They were the great natural artists of the universe.

When the Kallidorians withdrew their probing minds, none of them spoke for a long time.

"You have seen all we have to show you, my lords and ladies," Garthane said quietly. "We hope you will consider well what we have to offer the people of Kallidor, and then weigh it in the

balance against the gift of the Dark Emperor."

Then he bowed, and all in his retinue bowed with him. Even the dolphins dipped their heads in the water of their tank.

Ilax stepped forward. "We are honored and moved by this demonstration, Master Garthane. On behalf of my people, I thank you all for what you have given us. I promise you that we shall consider your offer with all the seriousness it merits."

"May the Infinite guide you in your choice," Garthane said.

"Indeed, let us hope so," Ilax answered.

Just before the visitors departed from the council-chamber, Garthane noticed several things: Andane still glowered at him, and Aleana still looked upon Red Rian with great fascination and longing. . . .

CHAPTER EIGHT

The Hissing Assassin

Gleaming foully, like a missile fired from the hot, cannon-mouth of hell, the huge Mordling starship rose into the blue sky of Kallidor on an immense column of roaring flame. Behind it, dwarfed by comparison, followed a thousand black ships of the Ysss high command.

In the control-center of the Mordling supership, at the control-console that had been modified to permit lesser beings to pilot the *Mordling Glory*, Blorg the Devastator pondered in silence while his Ysss co-pilot took the ship up.

The god of Sserp was on a secret mission whose objective was known only to himself, Quaarg, and the Dark Emperor. Ylang was taking no chances this time; the arrival of Garthane and the Fellowship's "old guard" on Kallidor told the Devourer that its archenemy was about to make his final move. And when Andane had informed the emperor of the Fellowship's counter-offer, that immortal entity experienced a cosmic anxiety-

attack. *Love was the one thing Ylang had renounced in his drive for power–and love was the one thing he feared and abhorred most in all the living universe.*

So as a precaution, and in addition to his secret dealings with Andane and the dissident Kallidorians, Ylang-Ylang had dispatched Blorg on the most important mission of his infamous career.

You are to rally every available starship from every galaxy within the time-range of my summons, the Devourer had informed his steward, *and assemble–with all deliberate speed–the greatest fighting force ever seen among the stars. You have just two weeks to assemble this force, for I am certain the Kallidorians will have made up their minds by then.*

But how will we continue to contain and suppress the numerous galactic rebellions, Father Ylang? the Devastator asked.

Damn the rebellions! Ylang thundered, shaking the lair with an explosion that sent its servants sprawling on the floor—even the massive and indestructible Blorg. *Pull everything out–every starship capable of withstanding the stress of the hyperspace leap!*

Let the ground forces on those worlds fend for themselves, you idiot! I want a force ten times as great as the dark armada! Do you understand me, Blorg?

The Dark emperor roared and flared like the overture to Doomsday, and even the god of Sserp cowered before its horrendous display of pyrotechnics. Quaarg lay face-down on the floor and voided in his body-armor, wailing like a newborn snakelet.

Yes, my lord, the demon of the machine replied humbly, when he was finally able to reply.

What happens to the ground forces on the occupied worlds is unimportant, the Devourer told its servants, finally mastering its cyclonic range and banking the stroboscopic intensity of its manifestation. *It will be a small matter to set things to rights later, once my grand plan has met with success.*

What you must do, my son, is to take this great force–as soon as the bulk of it has been assembled–and proceed at full-speed to the Primula galaxy, where you will bombard and completely destroy the planet Palos, the stronghold of the Fellowship of Light. Since Garthane and all the old monkeys are here on Kallidor, what better time could there be to deprive them of their home-base?

Immediately following that you will proceed to Aurea Solis, and engage and destroy every starship of the League of Free Worlds that you can find. After you have accomplished that pleasant little task, you are to irradiate Aurea Solis and extinguish all life on the surface of the planet. That will be the emblem of my vengeance: the League will be eradicated from living memory. But I warn you, Blorg, if even so much as a germ-culture remains alive there, it will go hard with you.

I hear and obey the Lord of Life and Death.

Go now! Ylang boomed, singeing Blorg's outer-plating with a fiery blast. *Now!*

Not even daring to rise in the presence of his master's insane fury, the lord of the Ysss backed out of the lair on his metal hands and knees. And within thirty minutes, the thousand and one star-

ships lifted-off from the surface of Kallidor.

Blorgs rival was the next object of the Dark Emperor's attentions. *Quaarg!* the terror-stricken reptiloid's fluttering thoughts replied.

Now you shall do me the service that will earn you the gift of eternal life, the Great Devourer commanded. *I do not care what the risk, or what sacrifice it entails, but you must prepare to terminate the life of that stinking primate, Garthane.*

Garthane smiled warmly at his companions after they had returned to their quarters. "You have all done well, my friends. You've made me very proud. Thanks to you, we have shown the Kallidorians a vision of the finest things that life has to offer."

"It was, uh . . . kind of embarrassing," Ween told him.

"Yeah," the star-pirate added. "Like showing up at a grand banquet in your honor, and forgetting to wear your pants."

Garthane chuckled. "Revealing the deepest parts of yourself to strangers is always an ordeal. You were all very brave."

"I've heard of peepshows before," Oruna chimed in, "but that was something else!"

"Do you think we convinced them, Garthane?" Nila asked.

"It's hard to say," the High Master answered softly. "But we did absolutely everything we could. We can do no more."

"Oh, I don't know," the star-pirate said with a lop-sided grin. "I could always sing for them."

"Even in this galaxy, that'd be the ultimate torture," one of the Taylian pirates muttered.

"Ah, you geeks all have tin-ears," Rian replied. "Love is music, and it makes a man sing."

"Well if that's the case, skipper, I just found something love can't do," a burly crewman volunteered.

Everyone in the room watched him with interest. Even Garthane raised an eyebrow in curiosity.

"Oh yeah," the star-pilot countered testily. "What's that, Bann?"

"It ain't improved your voice any."

Suddenly the room rang with the laughter of all in it—all except Red Rian. The star-pirate made a sour face and shook his head as he looked around the room. He was under the impression that his singing had greatly improved since he and Nila became lovers.

"Report to me at eighteen-hundred hours, Bann," he grouched.

A voice piped-up from the midst of the crew. "You ain't gonna put a man on report for bein' right, are ya, skipper?"

"Who the hell said that?" Rian demanded, glaring at the sea of poker-faces that was his crew. Suddenly, two powerful, furry arms reached out for his shoulders and spun him around. As Rian transferred his glare to Purpur, the felinoid winked at the skipper of the Hazard and cocked his thumb at Nila.

Rian nodded slowly as he realized what the cat-man wanted him to do. "Okay, wise-guys," he growled. "Let's put it to the acid-test, and cut out all this brango manure." Nila smiled at him sweetly when he reached her side.

"Tell 'em, babe," he said to the lady from the golden planet. "Has my singing improved, or has

it not?"

"Rian, my love," she replied, still smiling sweetly at her lover, "as far as the crew are concerned, the only improvement in your singing is the fact that you do less of it in the Hazard .. and more of it in my bedroom."

Laughter shook the room. The pirates howled and guffawed. The Fellowship members—Garthane included—laughed out loud. Purpur yowled and gurgled. The dolphins barked and twittered in their tank. Altektu and D-Anacom covered their mouths and laughed politely. And the robot couple, O-V-1 and O-V-2, spluttered and crackled as if they were about to short-out.

Rian's complexion turned redder than his beard. He reached out and ensnared Nila in a bone-crushing and affectionate bear hug. "If you weren't so damned tough," he told her, shaking his big fist in her face, "I'd give you one to remember."

"Save it for tonight," she whispered, as she tugged on his beard and drew his face down to hers. "Then I'll let you take your best shot. . . ."

More than a week-and-a-half had passed since the Kallidorians witnessed Garthane's demonstration of the varieties of love. Their hosts were a prudent race, it seemed, and everyone was extremely anxious for the verdict to come in as time passed.

"It won't be long in coming," Garthane told his companions as they strolled through Cerebron's magnificent central park. "I can sense them getting ready to make a decision, even though I can't penetrate their minds."

With this pronouncement, the conversation drifted to other matters. "I still can't believe the size of that Mordling starship," Ween said in awed tones. "They must have been something else!"

"Thank the Infinite they're extinct now," Oruna said.

"Not quite," the star-pirate corrected her. "There's still the old gas-bag." He shook his head. "Y'know, I'm really bugged by Blorg's transformation. I should have finished him off when I had the chance," he said wistfully. "It doesn't pay to underestimate Ylang-Ylang."

"We must never do that again," Garthane warned his companions. "Especially now that we share the same planet with it."

"Garthane, how's Dann?" Nila asked.

"Dann's doing very well, Nila. He sends you his love." The High Master smiled at her warmly. "He finally realized why Valennia accompanied him to to Palos."

They all turned and looked at him expectantly. "My son is adjusting even more rapidly than I'd hoped."

The cat-man purred like a starship's engine in overdrive.

Nila took the High Master's hand. "That's good news. She's a wonderful person. I'm happy for them."

Rian grinned. "Three cheers for the kid from Aquaea."

"Here we are, folks," Ween said. "Now we can eat. Boy, I'm so hungry, I could eat a Ysss!"

"Not even a Karian vulture could eat a Ysss, Weenie-boy," the star-pirate commented.

Just as evening began to settle gently on Cere-

bron, they entered the courtyard of a spacious garden-apartment. Ilax and Aleana were waiting for them.

After their ritual greeting, the pair led their guests through a wide floral arcade. "We shall eat beneath the stars," Aleana told them, "Kallidorian-fashion."

Oruna looked up at the star-saturated sky. "Doesn't it ever rain around here?" she asked.

"Only when we wish it to," Ilax replied. "We have a number of weather-stations circling the globe that regulate and stabilize weather conditions."

They emerged from the arcade and found themselves in the midst of a veritable botannical garden of indescribable beauty and diversity. "Be seated, please," Aleana told them when they had arrived at a clearing within a circle of graceful lavender trees whose scarlet leaves trembled in the evening breeze.

Gentle machines, delicate mobile sculptures that were as functional as they were artistic, served them multi-colored, garnished drinks in spiral, translucent glasses. Their first tentative sips amazed the guests: it was as if their tongues had been transformed into omni-sensory organs capable of interpreting every subtle gradation of the rainbow of oral color that resided within the nectar of the Kallidorians.

"Wow!" exclaimed Ween, who usually avoided alcoholic beverages. "This sure beats that liniment you guzzle, Rian."

The star-pirate took another sip. "There's hope for my taste-buds, after all," he reflected. "It's like making liquid love."

Aleana gave him a smouldering look. "Wait until you taste the food," she said.

"My, my," sighed Oruna. "It's like swallowing the color spectrum."

"Garthane," Ilax said, finally turning his attention away from Nila. "You have given our people much to think about. But Ylang-Ylang set our natures on their present course ages ago. Do you really think they can be altered sufficiently to accommodate love as you know it? Or have we perhaps evolved too far for that?"

"The only barrier to love is selfishness," Garthane told him.

"Ylang showed us the Mordling past," Ilax confided. "And it was horrible. But at the same time, it was a staggering vision of the possibilities of power. Immortality promises unthinkable power."

"But a power founded on selfishness, Ilax. Its price is the death of the soul."

"Andane feels the price is worth paying, Garthane."

"Then he has already been seduced," the High Master replied.

They were interrupted by the arrival of the food. All serious discussion ended as the visitors partook of the unequalled cuisine of Kallidor.

After dinner, a number of other Kallidorians arrived. Some of them drew Garthane into a deep discussion of the moral purposes and uses of power. Several of the more technologically-oriented artist-creators engaged Ween and Oruna in an involved discussion about the uses of mechanical aids in the process of artistic creation. The remaining three Kallidorian new arrivals tele-

pathically quizzed Purpur about the cat-folk of Yahwoo. Ilax and Aleana showed Nila and Rian the beauties of the botannical garden, each taking the guest of the opposite sex down a path.

"I was much impressed by the display of your love for Captain Rian," Ilax told Nila. "Your interior lives must be very rich."

"Mine is richer now than I ever dreamed possible," Nila answered.

"Is love of that kind exclusive, lady Nila?"

She thought for a moment as they entered a glade where birds sang in the deep shadows of tall, thick trees. The moon of Kallidor gleamed through the interstices of the entwined branches with a thousand small points of light.

"I suppose so, lord Ilax," Nila finally answered. "My spirit is so engaged, and my heart so full, that anything more would probably overload my system."

"But you have not tried giving your love to another, as well?"

The question was strange . . . almost ominous.

"I don't understand you, my lord," she replied.

"Look at me," Ilax said softly. "Am I attractive by your standards?"

"You are . . . beautiful, Ilax," she replied uneasily, unable to help herself. "More beautiful than any humanoid I have ever seen."

Nila felt a strange, golden presence humming in her mind. Its resonance spread to her body and filled her with a quickening desire. Ilax opened his arms and smiled at her with the beauty of a classical statue.

"Come to me and give me your love," he whispered.

She started toward him slowly, moved by a will that overrode her own. "But Ilax," she murmured, "you know I love Rian."

As he put his arms around her, he said, "I know. Come to me anyway." Then he bent his head down to kiss her . . . .

Rian felt uneasy and incredibly aroused at the same time. A warm flush invaded his body, and he heard a strange, seductive music somewhere in the back of his consciousness. The night was still and fragrant and beautiful. As he faced Aleana in a field of tall, waving silver grass, the star-pirate undid the top three pressure-buttons of his jumpsuit. The auburn-haired beauty smiled at him like the goddess of the moon as she reached out a cool hand and stroked his hairy chest.

"Uh," he gasped, "warm, isn't it?"

"Rian," she murmured, running her lavender nails down the alley between his pectorals, "look upon me, and tell me what you see."

He felt the flutter of butterfly wings in the pit of his stomach, followed by a surge of taurine vitality and lust. "I see before me," he answered, speaking out of some strange and unknown compulsion, "the most gorgeous female I have ever seen in all my years of star-hopping."

Tuk! Tuk! Tuk! Rian heard three more of his pressure-buttons pop open. Then he felt Aleana's cool hand glide down over his belly.

"Phew," he sighed. "Are you, uh . . . aware of what's happening, my lady?" he asked in a strangled voice.

"We both are, Rian," she whispered, as she took his trembling right hand and placed it on her smooth, cool flesh.

The skipper of the Hazard gulped, unable to take his eyes from her beautiful face. "I can't do this, Aleana," he groaned, summoning up the last vestiges of his dissolving will-power. "I love Nila. Don't you understand that?"

"I understand," she replied huskily, pressing her body to his. "It does not matter."

"Well, uh . . . ," he muttered weakly, "it kind of matters to me. Don't be offended, but. . . ."

"I shall not be offended, Captain Rian. Your lovemaking will be a gift and a compliment to me."

"You, uh . . . wouldn't settle for my affectionate regard, would you, Aleana?"

"Make love to me, Rian," she ordered in a whisper, as she drew him down to the sweet, cushioning grass.

"I seem to be in no position to argue," he sighed. "But I'll tell you this: it's gonna be a puppet-show."

Tuk! Tuk! Tuk! went the last of Red Rian's fastened pressure-buttons . . . .

Garthane was in the midst of a passionate and involved discussion with his hosts when Ilax and Aleana returned separately with their respective guests. The others were also deep in conversation with the brilliant and engaging Kallidorians. Only Ween Leever noticed anything out-of-the-ordinary.

There was something about the expressions on the faces of the four that registered on some subliminal level of the boy-genius mind. Ilax and Aleana had a look that he later identified as a combination of satisfied curiosity and gratified desire. And the look that he saw on the faces of Rian

and Nila . . . . He instinctively related it to the look on Oruna's face when they lay sleepy and content in each other's arms just before going to sleep. And he had seen that odd look of almost-unconscious satisfaction on his own face, as well . . . in the lumi-mirror, just before he switched off the lights at the end of a long and lovely night.

But that unmistakable look was mixed with something else, too. Their eyes had a light glaze to them, as if they had been sleepwalking . . . as if the consciousness of their recent experiences was hidden from them. He had never seen them look so strange. *What was going on?*

Ween didn't have time to speculate further, because Garthane rose from his seat, thanked his hosts for a most pleasant evening, and then bade them good night. The others followed suit, and departed with him. As he turned away from the Kallidorians, Ween couldn't help noticing the enigmatic smiles on the faces of Ilax and Aleana.

On the way back to their quarters, they walked through the city's ravishing central garden-park once more, under the full and silver moon that bathed everything in its benign light, listening to the elfin music of Cerebron's nightbirds. In the presence of all this supernatural beauty, no one spoke; being alive and well in the heart of the magical night was all that was necessary.

As the group turned onto a pathway that ran up a gently rising slope, Ween forced himself to think about the collective strangenesses of Ilax and Aleana, Nila and Rian. Just as he did, Oruna squeezed his hand and whispered in his ear with a voice as rich and dark as the honey of Aurea Solis.

"Wouldn't you just love to live here, babe?"

she asked.

Ween smiled and turned to look at her in the moonlight. But as he did, his smile faded. He realized that Purpur, who had been walking on Oruna's other side, had disappeared.

Not that this was unusual in itself: the felinoid's comings and goings were always noiseless, and often unexpected. It was just the sudden realization of the fact of Purpur's absence that had startled Ween. But then, as he was about to answer Oruna, he had good cause to be startled.

Suddenly the bushes on either side of the pathway rustled, and a number of black shapes stepped out into the moonlight. As the light glinted on their one-way visors, Ween gasped as he realized they were Ysss. *Oh no,* he thought, as he figured out what was happening. *It's an ambush—and we're smack in the middle of it!*

Ten towering reptiloids—five on each side of the pathway—flanked them with drawn zappers. The humanoids were unarmed, in accordance with the wishes of their hosts. Garthane was right: Ylang *was* cheating!

If Rian was somnambulistic before, he suddenly became action personified. "*Yaaa-aaah*!" he roared, throwing himself at the five closest Ysss in a sidewise body-block. *Thwop! Thump! Blump!* He crashed into the close-ranked reptiloids, taking three of them down to the ground with him. The remaining two reeled backwards, arms scrabbling at the air as they fought to regain their balance.

Nila, Ween and Oruna darted across the path and lashed out with an almost simultaneous series of mudu and alepso kicks. Hissing in pain, three more Ysss dropped back into the bushes. But two

remained standing on either side of the pathway. They went into a crouch and aimed their zappers, black-gloved fingers gliding onto the firing-buttons as they did.

At that moment, each of them straightened up jerkily and emitted a ghastly, whistling hiss. Then they snorted loudly, shuddered spasmodically and fell to the ground, blood streaming down out of their visors. Garthane had killed them with his powers of mind! The High Master took a deep breath and began to concentrate on the six other Ysss who were struggling in the bushes with his companions.

Haaass! From the top of the slope, Quaarg the Destroyer watched the grim spectacle with satisfaction. *Exactly as I predicted,* he thought. *Time to send in the reserves . . . .*

He raised his upper right arm over his head, held it there for a moment, and then brought it down sharply. From a point down the pathway, mid-way between Quaarg and the combatants, five more Ysss slithered out of the bushes. They all went down into a crouch and levelled their zappers, bracing them tripod-fashion with their three other arms.

Haaass! Quaarg hissed sharply in anticipation of the kill. Ylang would be pleased that his plan had succeeded so well. *Garthane first!* he ordered the gunmen. *Burn him to a crisp!*

AHH-H-RUUU-AAAR-R-R! A thunderous roar split the night of Kallidor, causing the Ysss to swivel around in its direction. His silver mane gleaming in the moonlight, Purpur's massive, furry shape hurtled through the air at the startled reptiloids.

That filthy cat-thing! Quaarg exclaimed, as Purpur tore into the would-be assassins with unbelievable tigrine speed and ferocity. The Ysss flew in all directions, and before they were able to scramble to their feet, two of them had already boarded the one-way express to hell.

Purpur had just locked an arm around the neck of the third, and was forcing his head forward with the other, when Red Rian shot out of the bushes behind him and slammed into the fourth Ysss, taking him to the ground in a clatter of body-armor. The fifth Ysss took aim and was about to laser the star-pirate down, when the sharp crack of reptiloid bones caused him to spin around reflexively.

Blump! The body of his dead companion hit him square in the chest, knocking the gunman off his feet. By the time Rian pliedrove the fourth Ysss to the round, breaking his back, Purpur had torn open the throat of the fifth.

Haaass! Quaarg signalled again. Five more Ysss emerged from the bushes at his side. *This will do it,* he thought, as they strode put in front of him and crouched, levelling their weapons at Rian and Purpur.

Haaazz and Siiiz–get Garthane! Quaarg ordered, leaving the other three free to concentrate their fire on the skipper of the Hazard and his first mate.

Haaa-aa-aaargh! Five strangled gurgles greeted his ears, and Quaarg saw the five gunmen straighten up and totter backwards like puppets under the hand of a drunken puppeteer. A shudder rippled his scales as he realized it was too late: Garthane had finished the others off and was now

concentrating his powers of mind on the remainder of the assassins!

His four arms flailing wildly, Quaarg dove into the bushes, rolled through them, and blundered into a bed of Sunwatchers, trampling down their delicate beauty in his haste. Frantically, he ripped open his holster and whipped out his zapper. *Got to get back to Ylang's residence,* he thought. *Once I come within range, the guards there will cover me.*

Quaarg tripped and fell, rolling down the side of a hill. He grunted stertorously as he got to his feet, still clutching his zapper tightly, and lurched off as fast as his powerful legs would carry him.

Fear lent wings to his feet. Not fear of the enemy, for the Ysss fear only the Dark Emperor and the god of Sserp; but the terrible fear of losing the power and immortality that Ylang-Ylang had promised him—power and immortality that had just come within his reach.

Quaarg dropped to his knees as he came within sight of the emperor's residence at the far side of the park. *Another few seconds, and I'll be safe,* he thought, hissing and panting from his exertions. As he straightened up, he turned to glance at the tall flower-beds behind him. *Not a sound,* he told himself. *Not a trace of pursuit. I'm safe!*

Just as he turned back, he heard a rustling sound in the bushes off to his left. He darted a nervous reptilian glance in that direction. *Haaa-aa-aaass!* There in the moonlight, silver mane flying behind its head, fangs and claws glinting like razors, was the cat-thing—coming at him through the air! Quaarg threw himself backwards, whipping his zapper around as he did.

AH-H-H-RUUU-AAAR-R-R! roared the creature that had just killed five Ysss.

Whaang! Whaang! Whaang! whined Quaarg's answering laserfire . . . .

CHAPTER NINE

A New Generation of Gods

Go into the fire
That burns beyond life's portal.
Evil is desire
That science makes immortal.

Power rules the star-seas, unlocks the secrets of time,
Power flows from great Ylang, that power can be thine.
Dominate the ages, rule in eternal bliss,
Power is the greatest gift, the emperor's dark kiss.
Sacred Hymn of the Ysss

"That was Quaarg," Garthane grunted as he and his companions sprinted down the path, "the Dark Emperor's ambassador."

Rian was frantic with worry. He'd heard Purpur's roar, and seen the flare of the laser-volley that followed it. "Purpur!" he bellowed. "Purr! Answer me, damn it!"

They all stopped suddenly. Blood and scorched bushes told them they had reached the spot where Quaarg and Purpur had their encounter. Rian gestured for them all to spread out. "I can't find Purr," he said, his voice cracking under the pressure of his anxiety.

"I found Quaarg," Ween said flatly.

Rian spun around. "Where is he?"

Ween took a deep breath before he replied. "He's over here," he answered, pointing with a shaking hand. "And over there . . . and over there . . . and over . . . . "

"Yoooch!" Oruna exclaimed, cutting Ween short as she made her own tally of Quaarg's torn and scattered components.

"But where the hell's Purpur?" Rian demanded.

Meow. A weak kitten-cry came from a bed of fire-roses. As they all turned around, the group saw the cat-man dragging himself out of the flowers. The top of his mane was badly scorched, and a swath of fur had been burnt away down the entire length of his back.

Rian knelt beside his first mate and cradled him in his arms. Nila knelt on the felinoid's other side and gently stroked his singed brow.

"Didn't have the strength left to yowl, did you?" Rian warmly asked his closest friend. "You had me worried, you big, fat tabby. Are you okay?"

Purpur looked up at him and smiled. His fangs and lips were crimsoned with the blood of the Ysss. It dripped from his open mouth and spattered redly on the star-pirate's forearm.

"You're a hell of a bloody sight," Rian said,

flashing Purpur that space-beacon grin of his. "But on you, it looks good . . . . "

All hell will break loose when the Kallidorians find out about this, the Great Devourer thought, wincing as it compressed its mass into a dark shape that resembled a lowering stormcloud. *Garthane is a worthy opponent,* the Dark Emperor reflected with grudging admiration. *I suppose,* it sighed, with a rumble like thunder over a distant mountain range, *now that Blorg is gone, I won't get another chance to assassinate the old bastard. And even I thought that Quaarg's scheme stood a more-than-average chance of success.*

Poor Quaarg. The sound of a muted cannonade filled the lair as the Lord of Life and Death sighed again. The Devourer was in a nostalgic mood: it had lost so many of its little toys in the last few years.

Goodbye, little Quaarg, the immortal entity thought sentimentally. *I raised you up too high, too soon. I would have made you a god like your brother, Blorg. You showed great promise. Yours is the foulest, most lovely generation ever to arise from the slag-heap of Sserp. Well,* the Devourer consoled itself, *at least there are still hordes of my little night-crawlers left.*

It was becoming quite a chore to keep up with the demand for qualified help, Ylang realized, what with the League and the Fellowship destroying so many of them lately. And, of course, the last two purges of the ranks conducted by Quaarg and Blorg respectively hadn't helped matters any, either.

I'll have to have a little talk with Blorg about

that, the Devourer morosely reminded himself. *After all, the supply is not unlimited.*

Ylang suddenly grew serious. *It behooves me to move fast now. The machines are all constructed and assembled. All that remains is to get the Kallidorians onto the operating tables.*

I must also stall for time. Blorg needs a while longer to assemble the superforce that will lay waste to the Primula galaxy. The only thing left to do is divide the Kallidorians and then reap the harvest I have sown. Therein lies the answer. That shall be my checkmate in the great galactic game.

Aaath! Stellth! the Dark Emperor boomed at the two prostrate reptiloids who lay trembling before it. *Come forward, my children!*

The two Ysss slowly raised their heads and looked at each other wonderingly. After a hesitant moment, they summoned up the nerve to address the Lord of Life and Death.

My name is Feth, great Ylang, the first replied tremulously, shielding his eyes as he faced the emperor's flickering energic mass.

A-And mine is Iilth, F-Father Ylang, the second stammered pathetically.

Never mind, the Devourer replied, the organ tones of its mental-voice ringing with resignation. *Come forward anyway. I want you to summon the Kallidorian known as Andane. Tell him to bring all his confederates with him when he comes here. Tell him to come to me in the dead of night.*

"Rian, let me see your back," Nila said as the star-pirate came out of the microsan shower.

"My back, love?" he asked, puzzled by her request. "Why my back?"

"Just turn around," she ordered.

Rian turned around and flexed his back muscles. "I'll have you know this back won first prize in the Urgellian livestock fair."

Nila furrowed her brow as she inspected him. "You've got welts all over your back," she said. "Scratch marks."

"One of the boneheads must have clawed me," he replied.

"No," she said slowly. "If that were so, the back of your jump-suit would be torn. And that's not the case. They look more like . . . love-grazes.

"Ah," he said, turning and throwing his arms around her. "In that case, they came from you."

She shook her head and looked him right in the eye. "That's impossible. I cut my nails just before we went to bed last night. And those marks were made by someone with very long nails."

"That's absurd, Nila. You don't mean to say you think I've. . . . " He stopped dead, as a shadowy memory flitted in and out of his consciousness: the brief feel and image of nails gently raking his chest. "Wait a minute," he said, absently brushing her golden hair away from her neck as he struggled for recall.

Something caught his eye. There were two small, reddish bruises on Nila's neck, just below her right ear. "Look in the mirror," he told her, rubbing the marks with his finger. After she did, he spoke again. "What do they look like?"

"They look like," she began studying the marks carefully, "love-bites."

"Uh-huh," Rian grunted. "Fresh ones. Not last night's."

They stared at each other in wide-eyed silence.

"Don't you get the feeling, love," the star-pirate asked in a husky whisper, "that we've been used?"

"This is a great shame and dishonor for the people of Kallidor, Ylang-Ylang. You have violated all the cannons of decency and all the laws of hospitality. You gave us your word that you would fully respect our neutrality."

The Great Devourer replied with unaccustomed humility to the outraged Kallidorians who confronted it and glared up at its flickering mass. *That has always been my intention, my dear Ilax,* it murmured, the music of its thoughts muted in the lair like a string quartet playing inside a tomb. *My willful servant, Quaarg. . . .*

"The late Quaarg," Ilax sternly informed Ylang.

That is as it should be, the Dark Emperor lied. *It is fitting that he has been punished. This overzealous action took place completely without my knowledge.*

"I doubt that," Ilax replied cuttingly.

No, sweet Ilax, that is the absolute truth. I had withdrawn into the innermost recesses of my soul, and was deep in meditation when the disobedient wretch acted–purely on his own initiative, I swear it.

"From now on," Ilax warned, obviously unimpressed by the Dark Emperor's alibi, "your servants and soldiers are confined to your residence. And they are not to stop anywhere between this place and the spaceport."

I shall instruct them so, my lord, the Devourer replied softly. *There will be no further violations, I*

promise you that.

Ilax nodded. "We have reached a decision, Ylang. Tomorrow, we shall inform you of it."

I am your expectant and obedient servant, my lord.

Decide what you will, fools, the Devourer chortled to itself as the Kallidorians left the lair. *It no longer makes the slightest difference. . . .*

Once its hosts had departed, the Lord of Life and Death blazed brightly once more, throwing off the shabby cloak of its humility. Ylang was extremely excited by the thought that the most important move in the great galactic game had been made. And this made the emperor—cosmic glutton that it was—hungry. Anxiety always made the Devourer hungry.

Aath! Hesss! Ylang boomed, summoning two of the new young reptiloids it had chosen to serve at court after the demise of Quaarg and his associates.

One of them spoke up as they prostrated themselves before their lord and master. *Forgive me, sire . . . but I am Thaaa, and he is Sssaa.*

The Dark Emperor rumbled like a storm of discontent. *Damn it–this is annoying! All these new names to remember. It would be easier to start over with another race, and just assign them all numbers!*

No matter, Ylang told them impatiently. *Bring me five hundred slaves. I am in the mood for a snack.*

It shall be done, my lord. The reptiloids backed out of the lair, bowing low until they bumped into the doorposts. On their way through the corridors that led to the slave-compound, both Ysss shi-

vered, but neither would admit the cause of his fright to the other. The emperor could always choose to tune in on their thoughts.

The most fearsome and disgusting thing about the Dark Emperor, even to the dreaded Ysss, was its gluttonous appetite, which was the visible manifestation of its evil and insatiable desires. Ylang consumed energy—the energy of living beings—the way a blotter absorbs liquids. It took unto itself the fear and suffering of others—and the corporeal forms which enclosed that fear and suffering as well.

"My lords," the mind-raped herald at the entrance to the slave-compound began to roar in a toneless voice. Then his bellow trailed off into a mumble as he struggled to recall the names of the pair he was announcing. The heralds were none too bright, Ylang having ravaged their minds, and the recent great purge of the Ysss leadership had left them in the uncomfortable position of not yet having been able to remember the names of Ylang's latest batch of courtiers.

Whap! Blap! Flanking the herald, the two reptiloids slapped him simultaneously. *Thaaa and Sssaa,* the former barked at him telepathically. *Get it right, you brainless fool!*

"My lords Thaaa and Ssaa," the herald announced in a quavering voice.

Haaass! The pair strode into the compound as the insectoid guards on duty presented arms smartly. The reptiloids returned the duty officer's salute and began to look the slaves over.

Humanoids for the main course, don't you think? Sssaa asked Thaaa. *They will give the emperor an appetite for Garthane.*

Thaaa nodded. *Yes, but we'd better round out the meal with a liberal helping of animaloids and insectoids. You know how Father Ylang insists on a balanced diet.*

Back in the lair, Ylang-Ylang smacked its flaming, energic lips in anticipation. It was fantasizing about how Garthane and the Fellowship of Light would taste. And about its other archenemies as well.

Rian and the others are a brave lot; they would provide nourishment of the highest quality. But I am sure the androids would give me indigestion. Perhaps not. . . . I wonder what an android tastes like?

Oh, the dolphins must surely be a delicacy! Beings as spiritual as they always are. If I really liked them, I could have a fresh supply flown in daily as soon as my forces retake Aquaea.

"My lords Ssaath and Aahts," a herald roared as the doors of the lair swung open. *Smack! Wop!* Ylang let its gustatory fantasies fade as two slaps rang out in the air.

Sssaa and Thaaa, you humanoid turd!

No one gets the blasted names right any more, the Devourer thought with irritation. Suddenly its light flickered low in anticipation as the guards herded the frightened, gibbering slaves into the lair. Ylang's roar diminished to a dull rumble that sounded like a disturbance at the center of Kallidor. It was a rumble of hunger: Ylang's borborygmus sounded like the shifting of plates beneath the surface of a planet.

Dinner is served, Father Ylang, Sssaa (or was it Thaaa?) announced.

The Great Devourer scanned the menu. *A pleasing assortment,* it thought approvingly. *I'll say one thing for the Ysss: they know how to market. Let me see . . . . I think I'll start with the animaloids.*

The dark music of its thoughts reverberated throughout the great chamber. *Come before me, people of Garowl,* the emperor ordered in musical tones, drawing the animaloids toward it with a slow and irresistible movement of its will.

Raa-oow! Yi! Yi! Yi! Caninoids were the first item on the menu, and they whimpered and howled in terror, lashing their tails about frantically and covering their horrified eyes as they shuffled up unwillingly toward the Dark Emperor's churning energies.

Come unto me! Ylang thundered.

Yi! Yi! Ha-wooow! The Garowlians yipped and bayed as they drew ever closer to Ylang. Suddenly, a hundred tongues of flame shot out from its mass and enveloped the terror-stricken caninoids. *Phwoo! Poof! Phwaa!* There was a series of blinding flashes, followed by the bonfire-blaze of the emperor's spreading mass. Then, when the awful glare had finally banked down, the other slaves wailed piteously as they saw that the caninoids had disappeared.

Ah-h-h, the Great Devourer sighed. *Delicious! Delicious! Now for the next course. . . .*

"Tomorrow we will know the will of the Kallidorians," Garthane told his assembled companions.

The Fellowship members bowed their heads. The robots emitted a hushed stream of white noise. The androids nodded to each other solemnly. The Tayliam pirates growled and muttered

among themselves. Ween squeezed Oruna's hand. And Red Rian threw an arm around Nila's waist and whispered in her ear: "This is it, babe. Tomorrow, we'll hear the bell that starts the main event."

Nila nestled her head against his shoulder. *So, it's come at last,* she thought, with a strange feeling of relief intermixed with dread. *After three years of bloodshed and devastation. It's come at last.*

"Tomorrow marks the end of the great adventure of our age," Garthane went on. "An adventure we have all shared. We have all given much, and tomorrow we must give still more. Prepare yourselves spiritually for this last great encounter. We must all throw our finest energies into the final struggle with Ylang-Ylang."

The High Master walked over to the tank where Lii-Arc and Neela watched him, their noses pressed against its glass. "Gather around this tank and join hands," he told the company. "Let us join our minds and spirits as we attempt to unite ourselves with the dark heart of the living universe."

"Well, kid," Rian whispered to Oruna as he took her hand, "hang onto your comb. We've got a big one coming up soon."

Oruna's bold, sassy smile met the star-pirate's challenging grin. "After this," she replied, whispering back to him, "the universe is gonna be minus one of two things . . . Ylang or us."

The doors of the lair swung open and Andane walked in, followed by nearly a thousand Kallidorians. In the center of the vast chamber stood banks of complex machines with operating tables at their sides.

"We are here, Ylang," Andane called out. "It is time to seal our bargain."

Activiate the machines, Ylang ordered the Ysss technicians. Switches clicked in the center of the lair, and the banks of machinery began to hum ominously with the sound of a nest of giant metal hornets. Vivid lightnings flared, their colors ranging throughout the breadth of the visible spectrum, bathing the operating tables in their constant alternations of light.

Yes, my sweet lords, the Devourer purred. *It is time to become immortal.*

With a roar that could be heard for miles in every direction, the colossal silver missile that was the Mordling starship, that last remaining artifact of the great and supremely evil Mordling civilization, thundered down to the spaceport at Cerebron.

And the silver form that emerged from that starship, followed by a retinue of four-armed, black-clad hissing figures, glowed in the dark, silent night with an eerie and obscene luminescence all its own. Blorg the Devastator had returned to Kallidor.

"My lord Blorg!" the herald bellowed as the god of Sserp, all metal and plastic and graceful mechanoid perfection, strode into the lair.

The place was still aglow with the violent and rainbow lightnings of Ylang's machines, buzzing with the dark, hornet-sounds of their activity. It also rang with the piercing cries of the Kallidorians who lay on the operating tables, thrashing and bucking beneath the restraining straps that held their tortured bodies, as they received the full force of the rays emanating from the Dark Em-

peror's technological apparatus.

Great Ylang, Blorg called out with his mind as he prostrated himself before his lord and master. *I have done all that could be done in such a short span of time, and assembled a starforce of unsurpassed size and power. Nothing that lives can resist it.*

Nothing except the Fellowship of Light, perhaps, Ylang corrected his steward. *I do not know how many–if any–of them remain on Palos. Or whether there might be any new ones to deal with.*

But that is of small consequence, the Great Devourer gloated, *for the transformation will soon be accomplished. And then you will have a thousand Kallidorians to take back to the superarmada.*

My lord Andane, the Lord of Life and Death boomed. *Soon the process will have taken full effect: Once it has, I wish you and your companions to board your starships and accompany lord Blorg back to the host of warships that he has assembled. I intend to humble my enemies tomorrow.*

And when the host has entered the Primula galaxy, you and your companions will use your powers of mind to crush all resistance . . . especially that of the Fellowship of Light. This little task will be your part of the bargain.

"We will leave the moment we are ready—Father Ylang." Andane still glowed from the effects of the treatment, and the look on his face was terrible to behold. It was the look of those who have been seized utterly by the lust for power and domination. "Are we now truly immortal, great Ylang?" Andane asked, his voice trembling with

suppressed emotion.

Indeed you are, my child, the Devourer purred. *You and your fellows are a new generation of gods.*

What about Garthane, Father Ylang? Blorg asked. *And Red Rian?*

Don't worry about Red Rian, you will see him again later, the Dark Emperor told his favorite. *I shall join you in Primula shortly, in my starship. After I attend to Garthane and the two hundred old monkeys.*

"You all heard that," Garthane told his companions when they emerged from the mind-lock. As they had come out of the trance-state, Garthane directed the group's collective mentality in a gentle sweep through Ylang's lair.

"Tomorrow the forces of the Dark Empire will be in Primula once more, along with the powerful Kallidorian dissidents led by Andane. Sister Nelava, you must contact Supreme Commander Ozain immediately, and tell him to rally the allied starfleets at once."

The old woman in the purple cowl nodded.

"I will contact Dann and Camenarpo," the High Master continued, and tell them to take the full strength of our new membership out to join the ships of the League."

He smiled a tired smile, suddenly looking older than Rian and the others had ever seen him. "I only hope the new initiates will be able to hold their own against the formidable powers of mind possessed by the Kallidorians." Garthane slumped down into a seat and rubbed his tired eyes. "They must," he said. "They must. . . ."

Red Rian came up to him. "Garthane, Blorg's going to be commanding that force. My lads and I would like to go out after him."

"Of course, Captain Rian. That is your right. But remember: Blorg is immortal now, and practically indestructible."

Rian grinned his bold, insolent grin. "Don't worry, Garthane. We'll figure out a way to pop open that overstuffed disposal unit."

Garthane turned to Nila and Oruna. "I suppose you women wish to go with the crew of the Hazard?"

"Yes, Master Garthane," Nila told him.

"I figure ol' Ween might need a little help," Oruna said.

"That is as it should be," the High Master replied, smiling as he rose from his seat. "Please take Lii-Arc and Neela with you, Captain Rian, as well as Altektu and D-Anacom."

"Certainly," the star-pirate replied. "What are you and the other Fellowship members going to do, Garthane?"

"We shall remain to hear the decision of the Kallidorians." He paused for a moment. "Then we shall go and confront Ylang-Ylang in its lair. . . ."

Dann and Val were sleeping in each other's arms, in the heart of the gentle night of Palos, when the voice of Garthane's thoughts awakened them. They stared at each other, scarcely daring to breathe, as the High Master told them everything that had just happened.

Goodbye Valennia, goodbye my son, Garthane told them when he finished his instructions. *I am*

glad that you found each other. May the Infinite bless you both, and may your lives be long and full.

Val clasped Dann's hand in hers and kissed him gently.

We may never see each other again, Dann's father said solemnly. *For the Fellowship members and I intend to confront the beast in its lair. . . . But know that I love you well, my son. And that I have always been proud of you.*

That goes double for me, Garthane, Dann replied.

I know that, Dann. Tomorrow marks the end of an age, and the beginning of a new one . . . for good or for evil. You must put all your hearts and minds, all your bright energies, into the final struggle.

All things are one, Dann and Val replied.

Infinity is at the heart of all things, Garthane said as he left their minds.

The lovers stared at each other in silence for a long time. "I may not be around to say I love you anymore, Val. Or you either."

"I know," she said, coming into his arms. "Let's say it now, once more . . . with all our minds and bodies and souls."

Aleana was disturbed as she took her place beside Ilax at the council-table. "Rian's gone," she whispered in his ear.

Ilax nodded. "And Nila with him," he added. "Andane is gone, as well. He and his faction have deserted our people for the gift of immortality. He has gone off with the monster, Blorg, to participate in the final star-battle. That was the price of his immortality."

He stared at the visitors assembling in the center of the chamber. "Our people are divided for the first time in our history," Ilax said with a trace of regret in his voice. "Things have changed greatly for us. You predicted that, Aleana."

"And they will change even more, Ilax," she told him sadly. "I still sense it."

Ilax rose from his seat, and all the other Kallidorians rose with him. He looked left and right at his companions, and then turned to face Garthane and the Fellowship.

"Great changes have come to pass on this planet," he told the High Master. "Our lives have already taken a different course. Andane has departed with a number of our brothers and sisters; our solidarity has been shattered for the first time."

"We live in a time of great trial and peril," Garthane answered gently.

"We know that now, Master Garthane," Ilax said with a sigh. "We thought ourselves free of Ylang-Ylang, but the Devourer has left its mark on us indelibly. In some ways, we are still its creatures."

Garthane's serene smile faded. His burning eyes never left Ilax' face.

"Nevertheless, we have decided in your favor. We choose to cooperate with the forces of life."

Garthane and the members of the Fellowship of Light bowed low before the Kallidorians.

"But we must remain neutral, Garthane. We cannot fight against our brothers and sisters. It would be a violation of all we believe in. Andane is mad with ambition and the lust for power, but we are not. We will not confront and destroy our

own."

Suddenly Ilax shivered and drew his robe tightly around his body. "But we give you our solemn promise not to aid Ylang-Ylang.

That is too bad for you, my little Kallidorian lumps of excrement, the Great Devourer cooed, as it withdrew the subtle probe of its thought from the council-chamber.

That is just too bad. But now that I have all I need from this place, I shall see to it that your lives will not be long ones. . . .

CHAPTER TEN

The Cosmic Conflict

The demon of the machine paced the decks of the *Darkness Eternal* in his impatience, an old and ingrained habit-pattern that his brain retained from the days of his mortal body. But Blorg's impatience was not the impatience of uncertainty or anxiety; it was rather the impatience of a snake barely able to contain itself as it hastens to strike at its unsuspecting prey.

Blorg was leading the forces of the Dark Empire into what he knew would be the decisive battle in the greatest campaign of the age. Once Primula had fallen, the liberated galaxies would rapidly follow suit; and then he would be free to turn his undivided attention to internal matters, and crush the empire-wide rebellions mercilessly.

As the Devastator strode through the huge black starship, the crew shuddered as his shadow fell over them, and cast awed and furtive glances in his wake. As he scanned the ship with his technological senses, Blorg was aware of this; and their fear

pleased him. *It is not love, but fear,* he thought contentedly, *that moves the stars.*

The starforce he'd assembled was staggering in its magnitude. It made the late armada seem like a pitiful gathering of children's toys. Of course, mobilizing such a great host of fighting ships meant that many occupied galaxies were now virtually unprotected, and that the rebellious scum who inhabited them would raise hell on the ground once they got wind of what was happening.

But that is of small consequence, the lord of the Ysss thought. *It will not take long to destroy Palos and Aurea Solis. And after the unsuspecting League's ships are blown to atoms in the void, I shall turn the people of the serpent loose on those galaxies and bathe the stars in blood.*

"Two minutes to hyperspace exit," a colorless computer-voice blared over the speakers of the *Darkness Eternal.* Blorg turned on his heel and headed straight back to the control-center of his flagship.

The bright ships of the League of Free Worlds gleamed in the blackness of deep space as they entered their battle formations. Garthane's warning had alerted the allies, and every spaceworthy starship in Primula and the liberated galaxies was on hand to meet the superarmada when it emerged from the energic vortices of hyperspace.

The Fellowship of Light had been monitoring the progress of that immense multitude of spacenavies, and their mental touch had been so deft that even the Kallidorians who travelled in the midst of the host had not been aware of it.

"Ready to bake a few snakes, you big tabby?"

the skipper of the Hazard asked his co-pilot. The felinoid responded with a deep, throbbing purr and a jab to the ribs that almost knocked Rian out of the pilot's seat.

"Hey!" the star-pirate exclaimed, as the Hazard's control-center rang with laughter. "Save that for the boneheads!"

Suddenly, the ship's speakers crackled as the interfleet communicator-frequency was engaged. "Greetings to the captain and crew of the good ship Hazard, from the Fellowship starcruiser, *Spirit of Life*," a voice informed them. "Brother Dann Oryzon requests permission to come aboard."

The bright starship's bulkheads vibrated to the wild cheers of the crew. And on the quarterdeck, Lii-Arc and Nella leapt in their tank.

"Permission granted," Red Rian said warmly, "with the great pleasure of the Hazard's captain and crew. Come aboard, Brother Dann, and be sure to bring the lovely Valennia with you."

After Dann and Val had boarded and been greeted warmly by all their friends, everyone assembled on the quarterdeck, around the tank that held the dolphins. They were all there: Rian and Nila, Ween and Oruna, Purpur, the Taylian pirates, Altektu and D-Anacom, O-V-1 and O-V-2 . . . everyone but Garthane.

As Dann and Val bowed before his spiritual parents, the dolphins dipped their heads in the water and returned the salute. Dann reached inside the tank and stroked their shining backs while they barked and twittered their love to him in delphinese.

"Neela and I rejoice for you both," the

dolphin-chief told him.

"When—and if—we return to Aquaea," Dann said, "I hope you will make Val a sea-sister of the Quee.

"She is already one of us," Nella replied courteously.

Dann thanked the dolphins, and then turned back to face his companions in the great adventure. "I wanted to be with you all for this last encounter," he told them, smiling that gentle smile of his. "Once again, we are permitted the use of our greatest weapons: the daring and bravery of the League, the powers of mind of the Fellowship, and the swift, sure arrow of surprise."

As the crew cheered, Rian hugged Nila and whispered in her ear. "He's getting to sound more like his old man every day."

"It's as if Garthane were here with us," she agreed.

"He is, babe," Rian whispered back. "He's here in spirit."

"It will take Blorg's superarmada some time to emerge from hyperspace and assemble in battle order," Dann continued. "And when they do, we'll be waiting for them."

Altektu and D-Anacom nodded gravely as their green fingers intertwined.

"There's gonna be a big run on snakeskins," one of the crewmen called out.

"Yeah," another answered. "An' I'm gonna bag me a bunch of the slimy things for old Klegg and the boys who didn't make it back from Bloody Kendall!"

Once again, the company's cheers rang out. Purpur yowled the fierce battle-cry of Yahwoo.

Even the robot couple crackled joyously.

"There's a bit of good news from an unexpected quarter, Dann-o," Rian told him, grinning from ear to ear. "You won't believe this, but there's a bunch of ringers in that invasion force. The good people of Axera, beyond Kendall, have retaken their galaxy and joined the superarmada on the sly, forcing their Ysss prisoners to communicate with Blorg at zapperpoint. Ozain received a crypto-com about an hour ago. Those people are somewhere in the host, and they're spoiling for a fight. The snakes are in for quite a little surprise from the spacenavy of Axera."

They all cheered until they were hoarse.

Dann beamed at his friends. "Camenarpo and I have refined the Fellowship's strategy," he told them. "And here's what we've decided to do. . . . ."

As the first of the mighty black starships streaked out of hyperspace near Palos, they were greeted by the sight of massed lines of gleaming craft that filled their forward vidscreens. The ships of the League surged forward and tore into the Dark Empire vessels before the startled Ysss commanders could even get their bearings in space.

The void lit up for miles around, as the whining beams of laser-cannon and the harsh glare of exploding torpedos ripped jagged holes of light in the fabric of eternal darkness. No sooner did the huge black starships come thundering out of hyperspace, their plating still aglow with electron exchange, than the massed array of bright ships blew them into minature supernovas that sent a

million steaming fragments of metal whistling through the void in all directions. The devastation was incalculable, but the mighty black vessels continued to come out of hyperspace in numbers as great as those of a plague of locusts.

Finally they began to overwhelm the ships of the League, forcing them back with heavy losses. But the arrowhead of surprise had more than one barb to it: the ships of the Fellowship, heavily escorted by squadrons of League starcruisers, moved in to confront the superarmada.

Together now, my brothers and sisters, Camenarpo told his fellows as they joined him in a mind-lock. *Send your energies at the first line of Dark Empire ships. . . .*

Damn the sun! Damn the stars! Damn all creatures that live in the light! Blorg swore fiercely, as he watched his ships toss and break on the rolling waves of energy that the Fellowship had summoned up from the dark heart of the Infinite.

Womp-bomp-a-bomp-bomp! His four fists drummed on the control-console. *The bastards are all here–waiting for us!* He reached out and activated the communicator.

Andane, this is Blorg the Devastator: The time has come to repay your debt to Father Ylang. Send your starships forward. Move out in the wake of your escort.

The Kallidorians are ready, Lord Blorg, came the reply.

Escort squadrons out! Blorg commanded.

The god of Sserp settled back in his seat and fixed his concentration on the forward vidscreen of the *Darkness Eternal.* He watched the black ships ahead toss and bob wildly as the collective

energies of the Kallidorians swept past them in a counter-wave and rolled forward with mounting intensity.

That ought to take care of the devious, sneaking scum, the demon of the machine thought with satisfaction.

Together now, Andane urged his comrades. *Break the billows of your energies over those bright ships.*

In every ship of the imperial force (the last starfleets having finally emerged from hyperspace), the Ysss commanders hissed with surprise and wonder as the bright ships of the League buckled and burst asunder in the void.

Good! Good! Andane exulted. *The escort shatters like eggs under the feet of a robot! Now for the vessels of the Fellowship!*

Argh! Andane was jolted in his seat, surprising the Ysss co-pilot beside him.

Haaass! Haaass! the startled reptiloid hissed nervously.

Aaaanh-h-h! Andane grunted, his sightless eyes going wide with some sudden and unexpected strain. . . .

"Go in on them from the flanks!" Red Rian bellowed into the communicator as he took the Hazard deep into the heart of the superarmada, followed by a great wedge of League starships, at whose center were a number of Fellowship craft. "Blow 'em apart, and rip the hides off those hissing bastards!"

Purpur yowled with fierce delight as the Hazard dove straight from the heart of the enemy force, guided by the skill of the great star-fighter.

"Kick some ass, Ween Leever!" Oruna called

out before the powerdive took her breath away.

"Yes, dear," Ween grunted dutifully as he lined up a huge starcruiser in his cannonsights and began to depress the firing-button.

"For Bloody Kendall!" screamed a Taylian gunner.

"Oh, baby," Red Rian whispered to his starship, as it dove deeper into the red sea of laser-beams, flaring torpedos and exploding vessels, "if you've ever loved your old skipper, now's the time to show it." He leaned over and planted a smacking kiss on the console. The ship bucked and heaved wildly to the punishing fire of the enemy. "If we get out of this in one piece, I'll fly nothing but milk-runs for the rest of my life, and carry no one but pretty ladies. C'mon, baby!

"Hang onto your seats, boy and girls," the star-pirate grunted. "We're going to hell!"

"*Aaa-aaah*!" Andane groaned in pain. *There are more of them–on our flanks! Get them!*

We cannot! came the panicked reply. *The forward wave of the Fellowship still has us engaged. No time to detach and re-direct!*

Who are these others? Andane asked in desperation, as he felt his life's-blood begin to seep out from his mouth and ears and nostrils.

His body jerked in the pilot's seat as a voice entered his mind, speaking with a power and clarity that drowned out the hisses of the confused Ysss beside him.

I am Dann Oryzon of the Fellowship of Light, and the son of High Master Garthane. And with me are the minds of the good people of Greeb. . . .

As the Hazard dove into the fiery, gaping mouth of hell, Ween Leever whooped with joy. "The

good people of Greeb! Did you hear that, Oruna?''

''Sure did, honey,'' she replied. ''Best news I've heard since Purpur punched Quaarg's ticket!'' Nila squeezed her hand excitedly.

Now, my brothers and sisters, Dann's thoughts rang out, *all together–now!*

Andane the Kallidorian screamed as his life's blood jetted out of his mouth and spattered over the control-console. And all along the line that advanced from the center of the dark force, Kallidorians screamed.

Dead! the panicked Ysss co-pilot thought into the interfleet communicator. *Lord Andane is dead!*

Fight back–you lilly-livered Kallidorian bastards! the demon of the machine raged. *Fight back, the rest of you–Ylang made you immortal for this purpose!*

But half of Ylang's new-made immortals were already dead, slumped over the controls of their starships in exactly the same fashion as the late Andane.

We are beaten, came a thought from the ranks of the Kallidorians. *Let us flee this terrible place!*

You can't do this to me, you craven scum! the god of Sserp told them. *I forbid you to retreat!*

But by the time he said this, the ships of the Kallidorians were already scattering throughout the superarmada.

Cheers went up in every ship of the League and Fellowship. The center of the great dark force was now a nebula of exploding vessels and rapidly-extending webs of wreckage, as the Hazard led the survivors of the daring attack out of the carnage.

''By Zel, you did it, Danni-lad!'' Rian hollered

as he looped and banked into a screaming turn. ''I could kiss you, kid!''

''I'm sure he'd settle for a manly handshake, Rian,'' Ween remarked dryly as he turned away from his gunsight. The Hazard's bulkheads vibrated to the laughter of its occupants.

''Ween, you're gettin' to be a funny man,'' Oruna told him.

''I gotta be,'' Ween membled, flushing as he suddenly realized he was the center of attention. '' 'Cause goin' to hell is a tough act to follow. . . .''

The starships of the Kallidorian deserters streamed through the energic dimensions of hyperspace. Amallion, successor to Andane, shook his head, trying to clear it as he piloted his ship. He sent his thoughts out to the five hundred survivors, and was astonished to discover that they were all in much the same condition as he.

My body aches all over, one of them told him.

And I'm burning with fever, another added.

It feels as if the very cells of my body were undergoing a molecular change, a third remarked.

It must be the after-effects of battle, Amallion reassured them.

I hope so, the first replied. . . .

By dint of threats of the most unspeakable nature, Blorg the Devastator finally managed to restore order among the ships of the battered armada.

All we have to do now is seize the time, he told his legions. *The members of the Fellowship are temporarily incapacitated. All that remains is for*

us to advance in one great wave and swamp the enemy. We do not need the stinking Kallidorians for that–the people of the serpent can handle it themselves.

Sensing a kill, the Ysss hissed and chuckled their ghastly chuckles in all the ships of the line. The moment had come: the great insult would be avenged at last.

"Oh, Mama!" Red Rian exclaimed. "Have you ever seen so many starships in your entire life?"

Purpur shook his head and yowled a plaintive little yowl.

"Dann, can you get the Fellowship together in time to meet them?" the buccaneer asked, wincing as he looked at the vidscreen again and saw the still-mighty armada begin to advance.

Dann answered him in a weak voice. "We're not ready yet, Rian. We need more time."

"There is no more time, kid," Rian told him grimly, the knuckles of his right hand turning white as he gripped the Hazard's joystick. "Here they come. . . ."

My body is on fire! Amallion the Kallidorian thought frantically. *Something horrible is happening to me!*

Ylang-Ylang has deceived us! came the reply. *It gives us death instead of immortality!*

Amallion nodded through his pain. *Then we must return the gift in kind.*

What can we do?

First, we must destroy the very foundation of the Dark Empire. After that, we will give Ylang-Ylang the death it has long deserved.

Where do we go first? someone asked.

To destroy Sserp, homeworld of the Ysss. . . .

"I don't believe it!" Rian bellowed in a hoarse voice. "I don't believe it!"

All eyes were on the Hazard's forward vidscreen, glued there by the incredible sight that filled its grid. The rear of the vast dark spaceforce glowed like sunrise on a summer's day. All along the rear of the superarmada, ships flared as they were consumed in bursts of energy whose brightness tore at the optic nerve.

"It's the rebels from Axera!" Oruna screamed. "The guys who commandeered the Dark Empire spacenavy—they're tearing the rear of the armada to pieces!"

That's the time we need! the star-pirate thought. "Dann," he said, swivelling around in his seat. "If I take the League's ships in and attempt to hook-up with the Axeran spacenavy, will that give you the time you need?"

Dann smiled at his friend. "We'll be ready."

What the hell is this, now? the lord of the Ysss screamed in telepathic fury. *Our own ships bombarding their ranks? I don't believe it!* Lashing out in frustration, he knocked the Ysss co-pilot out of his seat. *This is Lord Blorg!* he thought, addressing the armada. *Rear observers–make your report!*

My lord, came a prompt-but-confused reply, *its the spacenavy of Axera–they've opened fire with everything they've got and are blowing hundreds of their sister-ships to bits!*

Well, take them out–at once! the god of Sserp ordered. He halted the advance in order to deal with the madmen at his rear.

But no sooner had Blorg issued that order than

he found he had his four hands full at the front and flanks of the armada: all the bright ships of the allies were coming in at him like a flock of shooting stars—torpedos flaring and all guns blazing!

Cheers went up throughout the embattled spacenavy of Axera. *Help was on the way!* Despite the terrible beating they took as the dark ships re-formed and blazed away at them from every direction, the rebels were encouraged. *All they had to do was to hold out for a few minutes more!* But not a single soul in that entire spacenavy had the slightest idea that their sudden move would turn out to be the decisive factor in determining the outcome of the greatest star-battle of all time. . . .

There was thunder in the stars as the ships of the League tore into the superarmada, their pilots and crews heedless of the risk they took, firm in their determination to break the back of the savage beast that was the Dark Empire.

The void lit up with the light of a thousand borning suns, and the dark side of Palos that faced the incredible battle grew bright as day with the light of the unleashed energies of technology.

By the time the savage onslaught had spent its fury and the allied starfleets limped back to re-group, taking the surviving remnant of the Axeran spacenavy with them, the League observers were amazed to see that so many black starships still remained intact. Over a third of the superarmada was still there! The imperial starforce was still so vast that it out-numbered the bright ships of the League twenty-to-one!

Go in on them! Go in on them! All ships of the line—forward! the demon of the machine ordered from the control-center of the *Darkness Eternal.*

Finish the scum off! ordered the lord of the Ysss, in a frenzy of blood-lust, honking in his excitement like the airhorn on the engine of the express to hell. *Finish them off!*

Blorg screeched with an insane and deafening fury, causing everyone in the control-center of the *Darkness Eternal* to gag and puke in fear as the bright ships shot forward—and the restored powers of mind of the Fellowship of Light came into full play.

And as great waves of cosmic energy broke and shattered Dark Empire vessels by the thousands before his eyes, the stunned Devastator ordered the huge fleet that surrounded his flagship to cover his retreat. Then the *Darkness Eternal* banked into a beam-shuddering turn and streaked off for the safety of hyperspace.

They have won, Blorg thought grimly. *They have defeated the best that the Dark Empire was able to send against them. Ylang will have to start all over again.*

But so be it, he resolved. *What's done is done. But I am still very much alive, and I intend to settle the score with Rian and the others once-and-for-all. They have the dolphin-things with them. . . .*

He turned to the battered Ysss co-pilot, who cringed in fear as the beams of Blorg's eyes fell on its visored face.

Set your course, the god of Sserp ordered, *for the planet Aquaea. The Hazard will go there next. And I shall be waiting. . . .*

An unidentified force of starships has just gone into orbit around Sserp, a thought-voice announced as Siiin, brood-mother of Blorg the De-

vastator, turned to the vidscreen in her bedchamber with sudden interest.

Atmospheric security does not respond, the telepathic voice informed the viewers. *However, the starships do not appear to be those of the League of Free Worlds or the Fellowship of Light.*

Who dares to come here unannounced, without the express permission of the people of the serpent? the desertworld's dowager-empress asked herself, as a wave of black anger rose in her mind.

Positive identification reveals the vessels to be of Kallidorian make. They are classified as neutrals, and therefore pose no threat to our security.

Then why in the name of the pit are they here, you fool? Siiin snarled at the vidscreen, hissing like a queen cobra.

Her answer was not long in coming, as the Kallidorians poured the full fury of their tormented minds down onto Sserp.

The chamber heaved violently, and Siiin was thrown down onto her thermo-couch. She raised her head and saw the black city collapsing arund her. Just then the windows shattered and blew in with a force that knocked her to the floor, slicing her bony face to ribbons.

The plates beneath the planet's surface buckled and shifted; volcanos all over the desertworld spewed jets of molten slag a thousand feet into the air.

And even before Siiin had a chance to scream her last words, the bedchamber shook to a great, rumbling thunder and the floor beneath her split apart, revealing a midnight abyss that yawned up from the depths of the planet.

Blorg! the empress of the Ysss screamed in terror, as she plummeted down into the gaping mouth of hell. *Blorg!*

Amallion and the other Kallidorians screamed with an equal mixture of pain and fierce triumph as Sserp was consumed in a great flaming cataclysm.

The dying Kallidorian leader activated his ship's communicator. *Now we return to Kallidor . . . to repay our debt to Ylang-Ylang!*

By the time the glowing starships had entered hyperspace, all the Kallidorians were dead. . . .

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Facing The Star-Tyrant

Things are happening too fast! the Great Devourer thought, flaring with an awful, corrupt brilliance that reflected its panic. For the first in aeons, events were out of Ylang-Ylang's control

Screaming and moaning in terror at their master's behavior, the servants of the Dark Emperor struggled to their feet and resumed their labors. In each of the many buildings that constituted the emperor's residence, great gantry cranes stood over the center of the floor, holding dark, missile-shaped objects. The ominous structures resembled launching-pads, except for one curious detail: all of the gleaming black missiles had their nosecones pointed directly at the ground.

This is not possible! Ylang thought frantically, forcing itself to be calm in order that the Ysss and the slaves could complete the assembly of the mysterious in-door launching sites and their inverted missiles.

Ylang-Ylang had not recovered from the shock

of the news that told of the interception and destruction of Blorg's great spaceforce. Garthane had out-maneuvered the Dark Emperor, and won the great galactic game!

This is unthinkable! The Devourer's mass darkened as it compressed itself into a cloudbank of suppressed rage. *That whoreson, Garthane, managed to discover my plans. How was this possible? How could he eavesdrop in the lair without my being aware of it at all?* A shudder of glowing electrons rippled the Lord of Life and Death's mass as it grudgingly acknowledged the surgical delicacy and precision of the minds of the Fellowship of Light.

And now my great empire is overthrown! The League of Free Worlds survives, but my star-host has been destroyed. How will I rule the Dark Empire, now that the balance of spacepower has shifted? My forces will be swept away on all the subject worlds. So many of my little toys swept off the board in one move!

Another item was added to the catalogue of Ylang's woes as a deputation of trembling Ysss scrambled into the lair, prostrated themselves before the emperor, and haltingly informed it of the destruction of Sserp by the dying Kallidorians.

YAAA-HAAAAAAA! As Ylang screamed, a fireball erupted from the center of its mass and enveloped the cowering Ysss. When the dark, sulphurous smoke had cleared, the reptiloids were gone.

Sserp destroyed! The emperor's thoughts rang out in dissonances of disbelief as its mass churned and spiralled up into the air like the funnel of a tornado. *All my little snakelets gone! Curse the*

day I ever graced the stinking Kallidorians with my touch!

Ylang-Ylang struggled to regain its composure. *The Kallidorians shall be repaid for this,* it thought darkly, the fires of its thermal anger sputtering out.

Are the devices ready yet? it asked anxiously.

Yes, my lord, the Ysss commander replied.

Then order them activated at once! Ylang thundered.

The Ysss tottered off to the control-center as fast as his shaking legs would carry him.

Ylang seethed with grim and contained fury. *Soon the Kallidorians will be repaid for all their kindnesses to me!*

Activate all geo-penetrators! the Ysss commander ordered, as he lurched into the lair's control-center.

Activate all geo-penetrators! the com-spec on duty repeated, transmitting the order.

Uuuuum-m-m-m-vvvv-v-whaaa! As a Ysss at the control-console depressed their firing-buttons, the dark, inverted missiles hummed into activity. Suddenly, a concentration of purple rays shot out from each of their nose-cones, blasting great sections of earth out of the ground. Directly following that, jets of flame erupted from the missiles' tails, and they began to bore their way beneath the surface of Kallidor.

So much for those insubordinate little mannikins and their stinking planet full of flowers, Ylang gloated.

A great pang of regret shook the immortal thing's energic mass. *I won't have time to deal with Garthane and the other monkeys,* it thought. *I've got to get out of here! Once I'm off in the*

Mordling Glory, nothing will ever be able to overtake me. Then I'll have time to make plans. All the time in eternity. I shall return, one day. . . .

Stand by at the ship, Ylang ordered the crew at the spaceport. *I'm coming aboard!*

The lair grew dark as Ylang compressed its mass in preparation for the blast that would propel it through Cerebron on a searing course toward the reinforced hold of its gargantuan starship.

The Devourer was about to blow down the doors of the lair, when they suddenly swung open of their own accord. Hisses and gurgles sounded all over that vast chamber, as all the Ysss in it clutched at their helmeted heads and dropped to the floor with a clangor of body-armor. By the time they hit the ground, all the Ysss were dead.

The lair went white with Ylang's surprise as it halted the compression of its energies. There in the doorway, standing at the far end of a black carpet of fallen Ysss, stood two hundred purple-cowled figures.

So, at least I will not be denied this satisfaction, the Great Devourer hissed mentally, simultaneously *calculating the time it would take for the* geo-penetration missiles to reach the center of Kallidor.

Garthane's voice rang out in the lair. "The Ysss are destroyed, and your great slave-empire is about to fall, Ylang. We have come to bid you farewell." The look of grim determination on the High Master's face had its counterpart on the faces of the members of the Fellowship.

That will be my pleasure, you reeking little piece of humanoid excrement, the Dark Emperor replied, expanding its energies. *But you can tell me*

one last thing before I roast you in the fires of hell. What happened to my beloved son, Blorg?

The purple-cowled figures closed ranks and locked arms as they stood with eyes shut in the ghastly stroboscopic light of Ylang-Ylang's ever-brightening mass.

"Somehow your chief obscenity managed to *escape the cataclysm that laid waste to the* superarmada," the High Master told the Dark Emperor, his expression changing from determination to one of deep concentration. Garthane's eyelids fluttered, a sign that he and the Fellowship were about to enter their mind-lock. "He is on his way out of the lives of all those he formerly oppressed. That is all we know."

Not before he settles with Red Rian and the rest of the vermin, the Devourer thought, as it realized that Blorg knew his enemies would go to Aquaea.

You are wrong, Garthane, the Devourer told him, stalling for time as its energies continued to accumulate furiously. *Blorg will undoubtedly head for Aquaea–and visit a terrible and final vengeance on all those you love.*

The Devourer expected this to weaken Garthane's resolve, and give it more time to stoke its energies to their peak. But the High Master's reply was totally unexpected.

"That is in the hands of the Infinite," Garthane said calmly. Then his voice rang out in the lair again. "Now, my brothers and sisters—destroy the beast!"

HEEEE-YAAA-AAAH! The city of Cerebron shook to its foundations as the Lord of Life and Death screamed with all the discordant music of its tortured mind, sounding like a symphony or-

chestra gone mad, as the collective powers of mind of the Fellowship's oldest members shot forward like bolts from the crossbow of retribution and penetrated to Ylang's core.

Thundering and lightening like the heart of a storm, the Devourer screamed in anguish, buffeting and knocking to the ground Garthane and the members of the Fellowship of Light with the scorching winds of its pain.

Harder! Harder! the High Master's thoughts urged his companions.

WOOM! BOOM! BAROOM! Ylang blazed with the hellish light-show of its agonies. The explosions that arose from its mass redoubled in intensity and volume. The walls of the lair groaned and creaked like souls in torment, and the floor bucked and heaved like some huge beast in its death-throes. And far below the surface of Kallidor, the black missiles sped toward their destination. . . .

More! More! Garthane ordered. *All your energies!*

Horrible! Horrible! I can't stand it! the Dark Emperor screamed, as the shafts of mental energy tore at the inflamed fibers of its being. Never in all the aeons of its long existence, had the star-tyrant known such pain. The waves of its terror broke over the city of Cerebron, causing all its inhabitants to fall to their knees and vomit in an involuntary somatic response to Ylang's awful sufferings.

As they lay sprawled on the floor, the faces of the Fellowship reflected the strain of their incredible efforts. Pale and gasping, they sent the last remnants of their powers of mind out at the Great Devourer. The hideous thing continued to scream and explode, but its mass flickered and grew

brighter. *Despite their best efforts, Ylang-Ylang was growing stronger!*

Oooooooooo! Aaaaaah! Ylang sighed like a school of whales as it began to recover from the effects of the terrible mental onslaught. *It is finished,* the Devourer realized as the currents of punishing energy started to ebb. *They have done their worst, and I have survived!*

Then Ylang laughed. And its enemies shuddered as they heard that laugh that sounded like all the brass trumpets of the legions of hell on the day of last judgment. It was the insane laugh of utter evil, the brass laugh of darkness, triumphant over the forces of light.

The lair filled with the screams of the damned as the Dark Emperor sent out his chastening waves of mental energy at its enemies. Garthane and his companions thrashed uncontrollably on the floor, feeling their nerve-ends burn and the very atoms of their bodies contract with pain under the cyclonic intensity of Ylang's counterattack.

Burning welts rose on their flesh and their eyes bulged as an inexorable pressure mounted within their bodies and began to force the life out of them. Garthane heard the snap of membranes in his head and felt the warm gush of his life's-blood, as it flowed from his mouth and ears and nose.

How does it feel, Garthane, the Devourer gloated, *to have your feeble little body torn apart from the inside? How does it feel to be visited with the wrath of a god?*

Ylang practically swooned as it gorged itself on the energies of those who had dared to oppose it. Never in all the millennia of its cosmic gluttony had the Great Devourer tasted anything as exquis-

ite as the sufferings of the Fellowship of Light.

And now I drain the cup, Ylang boomed triumphantly, *and send you, Garthane–and all the little worms with you–to the realms of eternal darkness!*

NAAA-AAAAAH-H-HHH! The lair shook as if it had been hit by an earthquake. Great cracks appeared in the walls, and part of the ceiling crashed to the floor. Ylang flared with atomic brightness as its mass contracted in pain, protectively withdrawing its consciousness from its fallen enemies.

"No, Ylang," a voice rang out from the doorway of the lair. "Eternal darkness is your reward—not Garthane's!"

The Lord of Life and Death screamed again, this time with rage instead of pain, as it turned its attention to the newcomers. Ilax and Aleana stood in the doorway, with the Kallidorian leadership at their backs.

Beware, Ilax, the Devourer told him angrily. *Or I shall destroy you as well. You have pledged your neutrality.*

"That pledge was nullified when you caused the destruction of our brothers and sisters," Ilax answered grimly.

But those Kallidorians destroyed Sserp! Ylang exclaimed. *Let one cancel out the other.*

"No!" Aleana cried. "We are finally committed to a course of action. You are the horror that infects the living universe—you must be destroyed!"

You are not enough to stop me, the Devourer warned, flickering balefully as it concentrated its consuming energies. *Let me pass, and I shall over-*

look this insult. Ylang spluttered as it recalled the penetrators.

"You are right," Ilax said quietly. "We are not enough."

I've won! I've won! the Devourer exulted, screening its thoughts from the Kallidorians.

"But all the minds of our people are," Ilax continued, staring with sightless eyes at the fearsome and glowing entity.

You cannot do that! Ylang thundered, shaken by a sudden wave of panic. *I created you–I made you what you are! I gave you life!*

"And we give you death," Ilax answered softly, as he began to frown with concentration.

Ylang's scream shook the city and caused the birds to soar to the skies, as the collective powers of mind of the Kallidorians ripped into the Devourer with the claws of a brutal and iron bird of prey.

Screaming like the throat and lungs of hell, Ylang's total agony caused it to blow the roof off the lair. Then the Dark Emperor hurled its corrupt and tortured energies outside, into the gentle sunlight of Kallidor.

Forcing its demonic will into one last coherent pattern of intention, the Lord of Life and Death shot through the city like a comet, heading straight for the sanctuary of the last Mordling starship.

Aleana leaned on Ilax as the intensity of her concentration caused her body to sag. *Keep your energies focused on it,* Ilax telepathically ordered the other Kallidorians. *Don't let it escape!*

Not a soul in the city of Cerebron was on its feet as the great suffering fireball that was Ylang-Ylang shot toward the spaceport at a fantastic rate of

speed, consuming everything that stood in its path.

Birds were fried in mid-air. Flowers were scorched for miles around. Trees became flaring torches as the flaming thing hurtled by. Robots melted at its touch, and people were turned into smouldering heaps of ashes. Buildings listed to one side as their girders buckled. The very pavements of Cerebron were transformed into bubbling pools of molten lava in the Dark Emperor's wake. But through it all, the Kallidorians never relaxed their concentration.

Haaass! The commander of the mighty starship hissed in awe as the fireball outshone the sun above and increased in mass as it headed straight for the *Mordling Glory.*

Open the bay-doors! he ordered frantically. *And prepare for lift-off!*

Ylang's torment began to obliterate the last of its powerful will as the giant fireball shot into the hold of the Mordling starship.

"Ten, nine, eight. . . ." Over the speakers of the *Mordling Glory,* a computer-voice began to intone the count-down.

Safe! I'm safe! were the Devourer's last coherent thoughts as the ten-foot thick doors swung in and shut out the light of day.

"Three, two, one . . . Blast off!" the mechanical voice blared.

The explosion that followed shook Cerebron and its environs for miles around. But it was not the result of the mammoth starship's lift-off: it came from the final, dying agonies of Ylang-Ylang, the Dark Emperor and the last of the ancient and evil race of Mordlings.

The tremendous explosion that was Ylang's last gasp tore the Mordling ship apart in mid-air, and completely obliterated half of the great spaceport. The turbulence unleashed by the blast continued to spiral up into the air for several minutes.

And finally, when the last mushroom cloud had dissipated, nothing remained of the huge starship or its fiery passenger . . . *the Great Devourer was dead.*

It took almost a half-hour for the Kallidorians to recover from the shock of the encounter. When Ilax and Aleana got to their feet again, the first thing they and their fellows did was to go to the aid of the fallen members of the Fellowship of Light.

Aleana looked up from where she knelt among the unmoving purple-cowled figures. "They're all dead, Ilax," she cried out in desolation.

"Come quickly," he told her. "Garthane is still breathing.

As she knelt by the High Master's side, Garthane's eyelids fluttered. Weakly, barely audible in their minds, his thoughts reached them.

My brothers and sisters? he asked.

All dead, Garthane, Aleana replied. His eyes fluttered shut. After a long moment, he opened them again.

Ylang . . . has it escaped?

No, Garthane, Ilax told him. *Ylang is dead. The Great Devourer has itself been consumed.*

Thank the Infinite! All the worlds will thank the Kallidorians.

We will take you out of here now.

No, Garthane replied firmly, despite his weakness. *My time has come. I am ready for the great transformation.*

Ilax and Aleana bowed their heads.

I have one great favor to ask of you, Garthane said, as the light in his eyes began to dim.

Anything, Master Garthane, Ilax said, as Aleana took the High Master's hand in hers.

Go to Aquaea . . . the Primula galaxy. Tell my son, Dann, and the others . . . Give them my love . . . and my blessing.

We shall go immediately, I promise you that, Aleana told him.

She felt Garthane's hand stiffen in hers. "It's over now," Ilax said as her eyes met his. When they looked down again, the High Master of the Fellowship of Light was dead.

But the spirits of the two Kallidorians were cheered when they noticed the serene smile on Garthane's face.

They knelt with heads bowed for a moment. Then, true to their word, they rose and went straight out to the spaceport of Cerebron.

Just before their glowing starship left the atmosphere of Kallidor, Ilax and Aleana saw their homeworld consumed in the fires of Ylang-Ylang's final act of vegeance.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Showdown on Aquaea

The twin suns of Aquaea were two bright, pastel smears as they shone through the shifting cloudbanks that enveloped the waterworld, casting soft double shadows on its surface with their diffused light. The Hazard gleamed dully in the gentle light, as it sat on a sweeping plain that ran to the cliffs towering above the waters of the Western Sea.

Hundreds of feet below, in a cove that formed the only inlet in the rocky and otherwise unbroken coastline, the crew and passengers of the good ship said their goodbyes to Lii-Arc and Neela. Then, to the accompaniment of cheers from all on land, the dolphins were released from their tank. The Quee leaped and raced through the shallow waters of the cove, displaying their joy at being returned to their native waters. After that, they swam in to shore one last time.

"You must all return when peace has come," Lii-Arc said in the difficult speech of the humanoids. "The Quee will welcome you. Good-

bye, my son."

"Goodbye Father Lii-Arc and Mother Neela," Dann Oryzon called out as he waved. "Infinity is at the heart of all things."

"All things are one," the Quee chorused as they swam out to the open sea.

As the companions made the long ascent to the top of the cliffs, Val took Dann's hand and linked her other arm in Camenarpo's. "They're so beautiful," she said, "in every possible way."

Dann squeezed her hand gently as Camenarpo said, "The Quee are the noblest creatures beneath the stars."

"Kinda chokes you up, doesn't it?" Rian whispered to Nila. Too moved to speak, the lady from the golden planet nodded her head.

"They are love and courage personified," D-Anacom said softly.

Oruna sighed. "They've mastered the art of life." The catman bent over and licked her cheek with his sandpaper tongue. "Why, thank you, Purpur!" Oruna exclaimed, her dark eyes wide with delight. She reached up, threw her arms around the felinoid's neck, and gave him a kiss on the cheek.

Walking with his arms around the two roller-robots, Ween Leever beamed. "Good times are coming," he said. "I can feel it."

"All's well that ends well," O-V-1 crackled flatly.

"May I quote you on that?" O-V-2 crackled back.

"Yes, dear," O-V-1 replied, the increased susuration of white noise on its talkie-track indicating that it was highly flattered.

Rian frowned as he suddenly thought about Blorg the Devastator. "I wish I knew whether or not Old Bonehead got dealt his last hand at the Battle of Palos," he said.

"We'll find out soon enough, Rian," Nila told her lover encouragingly.

Sooner than any of them imagined. . . . As they neared the top of the trail, waves of rolling thunder broke over the plain as a great dark starship flamed into a landing. They all dashed up the path until they stood at the top of the cliffs, and stared in wonder as the flexiladder of the huge starcruiser descended to the ground.

"After the hiding we gave 'em," a puzzled crewman said, "what snake would have the nerve to ever touch-down in the Primula galaxy again?"

Instinctively, Red Rian knew the answer to that question. "Altektu," he called out to the sharp-eyed android, "can you make out the markings on that craft?"

Altektu peered at the massive black starship for a moment. "It is the *Darkness Eternal,* Captain."

Rian and his crew all whipped out their zappers. "Stand by, lads," he alerted them. "It's Blorg, all right. And he's come to settle an old score."

By this time, the cruiser's hatch had whooshed open. They all caught their breath as a horde of black-uniformed soldiers with blood-red epaulets and arm-bands streamed out of the starship on the double—armed to the teeth!

Purpur growled as Ween exclaimed, "Death Legion commandos!"

Rian shook his head. "And they're right smack between us and the Hazard. We're cut off."

"We can't go back down there," Dann told him.

"They'd slaughter us in the cove."

Whaang! Whaang! Whaang! Red laser-bolts whined overhead, as the Death Legion commandos spread out and began to advance in dark waves, firing their rifles as they came.

"Shiver my deck-beams," one of the Taylian pirates croaked, "there must be thousands of 'em!"

"Spread out over the cliffs," Red Rian ordered. "We'll make our stand there."

Whaang! Whaang! They scattered and ducked behind the rocks as laser-beams flared and exploded, sending showers of flying stone in their wake. *The commandos were finding the range!*

The black wave fanned out and extended its flanks to form a wide semicircle that cut off their retreat on both sides. Death Legionnaires still streamed out of the dark starship, charging ahead as soon as their feet touched the soil of Aquaea. The company of the Hazard were trapped—with their backs to the rugged cliffs that dropped steeply to the Western Sea hundreds of feet below!

A fearful roar went up in the afternoon air as the growing masses of black-uniformed troops surged toward the cliffs like a tidal wave rising from the heart of a midnight ocean.

Whaang! Whaang! Whaang! Rian and the others blazed away furiously at the enemy, dropping scores of them in their tracks. But the dark wave continued to swell as it rolled in on them.

"It's a suicide charge," Red Rian told his first mate through clenched teeth. "Blorg's sending those geeks in on a one-way trip."

As the last commandos thundered down the flexiladder of the *Darkness Eternal,* a huge and

gleaming shape appeared in the hatchway. Blorg the Devastator turned his head with mechanical precision and surveyed the battleground.

Perfect, he thought with satisfaction. *They're completely cut off . . . with nowhere to go but hell. I will have my revenge at last!*

"How's it goin', Bann?" Rian called out to one of his crewmen over the whine of his zappers.

"The bastards have forced us back to the edge of the cliff, skipper. We can't shoot 'em down fast enough!"

The news from the other flank was the same. Inflicting heavy losses on the Hazard's crew, the enemy kept rolling in.

Rian turned as three purple-cowled figures appeared at his side. Dann, Val and Camenarpo ducked down beside him as Purpur roared like a lion and blazed away at the commandos with the fury of a tiger.

"Get your men to cover us, Rian," Dann told the star-pirate. "We're going to take as many of them out as we can."

As the trio locked arms and stared out at the black wave that drew threateningly close, their eyes rolled up in their sockets, a sure sign that they had entered a mind-lock.

"Cover the center!" Rian bellowed to the crewman around him. "Bann! Gerrit! Hold the flanks!"

Ween wound up and tossed his discharged zapper straight into the face of a commando thirty feet away, hitting him smack in the chops and dropping him like a shot. Then, as he whipped out his other zapper, he heard Oruna cry out beside him.

"Look, Ween—look!" she yelled, her bright

voice soaring above the din of battle. "Look at them drop!"

Ween looked up and saw the entire first rank of commandos dropping to the ground like a herd of pole-axed Glavan steers. They clutched at their heads and thrashed about on the ground in crimson pools that were fed by the jets of blood that streamed out of their mouths and noses.

"*Yippee!*" Ween screamed wildly as the second rank dropped their laser-rifles and staggered on the edge of the plain, shrieking with pain as they clawed at their helmets and smacked into each other with a great clangor of body-armor.

Seeing the second wave of Death Legion commandos fall to the ground and splash about in pools of their own life's-blood, Red Rian ordered the men at the center to direct their fire at the enemy's flanks.

As the withering volleys reinforced the fire from his own hard-pressed flanks, the star-pirate whooped with joy as the enemy began to fall back. "The creeps are backing off!" he shouted, standing up to encourage his crew. "Let 'em have it with everything you've got, lads!"

The high-intensity beams of Blorg's eyes flared as he watched the Hazard's company repulse the savage attack. *Camenarpo, Dann Oryzon and the dark-haired girl,* the Devastator reflected as the third rank of commandos at the center of the dark wave screamed their dying screams and spattered each other with blood. *But they will soon be exhausted. There are only three of them. . . .*

Valennia shuddered violently and slid down behind the sheltering rock, almost unconscious from the strain of her intense concentration. Dann con-

centrated until he began to black-out; then he slid down beside Valennia, using the last of his strength to put his arm around her and hug her tightly. In a few moments, Camenarpo joined them, gasping for breath.

"That's it, Rian," Dann whispered to the skipper of the Hazard. "We can't do any more."

"You did fine, kid. Just fine," the astral buccaneer told him. "Garthane couldn't have done better."

After a quick survey of the enemy's disordered ranks. Rian ordered his men to re-direct their fire at the center of the milling black mass. As a consequence of the Fellowship members' assistance, his flanks were secure again. So the star-pirate was free to direct all available firepower on the main force.

Whaang! Whaang! Whaang! A storm of concentrated laser power broke on the commandos and lit up their milling black clusters with its violent flares. After several moments in the thermal holocaust, the Death Legionnaires broke and ran, streaming back to the *Darkness Eternal* in their rout.

"*We broke 'em, lads–we broke 'em!*" Rian yelled hoarsely, rising to his feet beside Purpur, who roared like a victorious lion. The edge of the plain was a study in contrast, its pale green grasses dotted with hundreds of black-uniformed bodies and smouldering piles of ashes that lay like islands in great shallow lakes of steaming red blood.

A fierce, honking blast resounded in the air over the plain, causing all the Hazard's company to turn in the direction of the hulking black starship.

"*Back, you pigs! Back, you star-scum!*" the

demon of the machine screamed in the terrible mechanoid voice of its rage. "*Go forward and drive them into the sea!*" the god of Sserp ordered. "*If you do not advance immediately, I promise you all a death one hundred times more horrible than any you could ever receive at the hands of the enemy!*"

"Damn, he's persistent!" Oruna swore, as she checked the charge remaining in her zapper.

"The monstrous thing will stop at nothing," Altektu told D-Anacom, brushing away the ashes from her scorched shoulders.

"Stand by, lads," Rian told his crew. "It looks like Old Bonehead's gonna fight to the last commando."

The surviving Death Legionnaires turned around slowly and faced the enemy once more. Hisses sounded among the ranks as the Ysss officers strode forward and got their scattered troops in order.

Rian called out for a survey of his crew's remaining firepower. The responses he received caused him to grit his teeth: the charges remaining in their zappers would only allow them to return the enemy's fire for a short time.

"Well, after that," he said grimly, "we'll just have to tear 'em apart by hand—the way Mr. Purpur does." The felinoid roared enthusiastically.

Just as the black wave—now reduced to a third of its former size—began to surge forward again, Rian ducked down beside Nila. "They're coming in to finish us off," he told her. "I don't know when we'll get together again, babe."

"Rian, I love you so much!" Nila cried, throw-

ing her arms around the star-pirate.

"That goes double for me, Nila," Rian said, just before they kissed.

"I think our number's up," Oruna sadly told her lover. "Kiss me goodbye, Ween Leever."

There were tears in Ween's eyes as he faced her. "Thanks for making my life so beautiful, Oruna," he said. "Thanks for your love."

"I got my money's worth, child," she told him with a bright smile, sassy to the end.

Dann, Val and Camenarpo joined hands. They said goodbye with their minds while the lovers kissed. Beside them, the robots and androids huddled together and exchanged farewells.

The Death Legion commandos charged with a roar and a whining volley of laser-beams.

"If I don't see you lads again," the star-pirate yelled, "I want you to know that—despite your abominable personal qualities—you were the best damned crew ever to sail the star-seas!"

The pirates all cheered loudly as they ducked for cover behind the rocks and trained their zappers on the rapidly advancing enemy.

"Goodbye, old pal," the star-pirate said, giving Purpur's silver mane one last, affectionate tug. "I'll see you around, hah?"

The cat-man licked his skipper's cheek and emitted a little yowl of regret. He had just been thinking of Yahwoo, his homeworld, and his sweetheart, Maowl.

Just as the Hazard's company braced themselves for the final onslaught, a series of explosions rocked the plain. Cheers went up among the defenders as they realized what was happening.

"It's the Greebans!" Rian bellowed. "They've

come up from the ship—and they're plastering the geeks with homing missiles!"

Ween's heart soared as he realized that the crewmen left on duty in the Hazard had come up to relieve them. "Those are my guys!" he told Oruna excitedly.

The Greebans had set out shortly after the landing of the *Darkness Eternal,* but the slow progress of the squat, missile-laden robots had delayed their arrival. But now they made up for their lateness, launching streams of minimissiles at the heart of the dark mass with devastating accuracy.

Blorg was not prepared for this sudden intervention. He bashed his metal fist against the hatch of the *Darkness Eternal,* leaving a deep dent in the starship's thick outer-plating.

The sudden and vicious Greeban offensive was tearing the remainder of his forces to pieces! The troops in the front ranks of the Death Legionnaires stopped in their tracks and turned to see what was happening at the rear. Rian and his companions sent out a terrible wave of laser fire that decimated the first rank.

"Never mind the cliffs!" the demon of the machine howled at his troops. He shook his head as he realized that more than half of the remaining soldiers were already dead. *"Close ranks and deal with the disturbance at the rear,"* he ordered. *"I will attend to those on the cliffs!"*

Indeed I will! the god of Sserp exulted, as he bounded down the starship's flexiladder. *The time has come to close my account with Red Rian and all his friends.*

"Heads up, everybody!" Red Rian told his companions, cutting short the cheers that were

precipitated by the retreat of the commandos. "That armored tin-can bearing down on us over there is Old Bonehead himself. This is it! Let's all give him a warm and fitting welcome!"

All gleaming power and destructive intent, Blorg raced over the corpse-littered battlefield, scanning the area with his technological senses. *They'll be busy at the rear for a while,* he thought. *So that leaves me free to concentrate on Rian and the others without fear of distraction. I should be able to tear them all to pieces before they get free of the cliffs. This is absolutely perfect. It will be my masterpiece.* The connoisseur of death was happy.

"Hold your fire," Rian told his people in a calm voice. "Let that mobile garbage-can get within close-range. Then we'll hit Blorg with everything we've got, and blow him away."

"Oooh, Ween," Oruna said in a breathy whisper, "I'm scared."

"Yah," gulped the boy-genius. "I know e-exactly how you f-feel."

"What is that thing?" O-V-2 asked with a crackle.

"The face of evil," Altektu replied grimly.

"Nastiest-lookin' assembly of nuts and bolts ever to come out of a tech-shop," Chief Engineer Bann said as he took aim and braced his zapper with his other hand.

"What's creepy is the way it don't make no noise when it moves," the fireman beside him muttered. "Now, that ain't like a machine at all."

"Steady now, steady," the star-pirate said, as he went into a crouch and levelled his zapper at the on-rushing Blorg.

Steady indeed, gloated the demon of the machine. *Steady as she goes, Captain Rian–straight down into the deepest pits of flaming hell!*

"All right, people," Rian said evenly. "Fire when I count to three."

Purpur stopped growling as he lined up the cross-hairs of his gunsight on the center of Blorg's silver chest.

Dann, Val and Camenarpo joined hands again and prepared to send the last of their mental energies at the Devastator.

"One," the star-pirate called out.

In another moment, the cliffs will be covered with blood, Blorg told himself gleefully.

"Two."

Ween Leever exhaled gently as his index finger began to press against the firing-button of his weapon.

Red Rian stared into Blorg's flaring eyes and grinned his bold, insolent grin. *Okay, you big pile of industrial debris,* he thought as Blorg was only fifteen feet away from him, *come and get it!*

"Three!"

Whaang! Whaang! Whaang! Phwaaa! Bu-Booom! Everyone fired at the same time. Whining like a legion of ruptured friends, the laser-barrage that streaked toward the demon of the machine shone brighter than the twin suns of Aquaea. The holocaust converged on the Devastator in a concentration of almost unbelievable thermal intensity. The Hazard's company kept their fingers mashed down on the firing-buttons of their zappers, maintaining their fire with deadly accuracy.

A roaring blast, immediately followed by rising sheets of fire, shook the ground where the lord of

the Ysss had been, and covered the area with billowing clouds of acrid smoke

Nothing could survive a concentration of firepower like that, Rian thought as he peered into the churning clouds of smoke, *not even a starship!*

Groans and cries of disbelief went up to the skies as the smoke began to clear. *Blorg was still there!*

He had been blown back by the force of the barrage, but he was still intact: Ylang-Ylang had built well, indeed! Scorched and encrusted with a fine layer of ash, his huge form lay on the ground thirty feet away from the star-pirate's position.

"That's not possible," Rian muttered to himself. "I can't believe it." Neither could any of his companions.

But conviction grew swiftly as the demon of the machine sat up, looked around, and started to get to his feet.

His roar of obscene, mechanoid triumph startled even the Greebans and commandos who were locked in a life-and-death struggle more than five hundred yards away.

You have had your turn, Rian, Blorg told his archenemy. And now mine has come. Death make you all welcome!

As soon as he had pronounced the ritual formula of the Ysss, Blorg charged forward—heading right for the star-pirate! He stretched out his arms and sent forth a laser-volley from his fingertips that blasted away chunks of rock on either side of him, sending the crewmen there scrambling for cover.

"Scatter!" Rian barked at his companions. "This dance is mine!"

Impervious and oblivious to the laser-fire that

rained down from all sides, Blorg started to climb the rocks that stood between him and the thing he hated most in all the universe. He lashed out with his arms and sent the few Taylians in his path sprawling to the ground. The demon of the machine stalked the skipper of the Hazard with a relentless and mechanical singularity of purpose.

Now, Rian, Blorg gloated, *the day of reckoning is at hand. The time has come to avenge all your insults in blood!*

"Talk is cheap, you stinking bucket of bolts," the star-pirate jeered, as he backed away toward the edge of the cliff. Five hundred feet below, the waves of the Western Sea boomed as they dashed against the rocks.

Dann, Val and Camenarpo exchanged horrified glances as they realized that their minds could not reach Blorg's.

Rian was now at the edge of the cliff. He tottered and fought to maintain his balance in the rising wind, as he side-stepped out onto a narrow ledge that ran along the rim of his position.

Blorg threw open his four silver arms and came after Rian with superhuman sure-footedness and grace. His clutching metal talons raked the air before the buccaneer's eyes as he lashed out at his enemy. A few more steps, and Blorg would have him. . . .

AHH-RUU-AAAH-H-RRR! Everyone suddenly looked up—just in time to see Purpur's massive body fly down from an overhanging ledge and slam into the demon of the machine with terrific force!

Any other living being would have been hurled into the waters by the impact of the felinoid's

powerful body, but Blorg stood fast at the edge of the cliff—holding the thrashing and helpless Purpur over his head at arms'-length!

Cats are not fond of the water, are they, my fine, furry friend? Blorg cooed rhetorically at Purpur. *End your days in the Western Sea!*

A great cry arose from the company, as the god of Sserp hurled the felinoid twenty feet straight out into the air. They all watched in horror as Purpur, arms flailing and yowling loudly, plummeted down and disappeared into the water with a great splash.

Rian was enraged. But his anger burnt with a cold, even flame as he continued to sidestep along the ever-narrowing ledge. "Never mind the others, scum-brain!" he rasped at the Devastator. "You haven't got Red Rian yet, you miserable, stinking pile of mechanical rejects!"

Blorg nodded contentedly as he looked up from the waters. *I will have you now, Rian,* he replied simply.

"Well, come and get me, Bonehead!"

The others all held their ineffectual fire as Blorg advanced on the star-pirate. The ledge had become too narrow for Rian to advance any more, and he crouched low as Blorg reached out for him.

"Oh, Rian," Nila whispered in a small, broken voice as the lord of the Ysss reached out his metals hands, their gleaming fingers twitching at the prompting of his murderous thoughts.

Just as Blorg was about to lay hands on him, the star-pirate made his last desperate move. He reached up and grabbed the Devastator's wrist, braced his feet agains the ledge, and pointed his zapper at Blorg's feet.

Whaang! Bwoom! Just as the second of Blorg's

arms reached out and clutched at the collar of Rian's jump-suit, the ledge exploded beneath his feet. The buccaneer threw himself backwards into the air as Nila screamed. Everyone gasped as Rian and the demon of the machine—still gripping the buccaneer's collar—shot down from the rocks and disappeared into the depths of the Western Sea!

The splash made by Blorg's impact was tremendous: sheets of water lept thirty feet into the air, and the sound echoed among the cliffs. Then they all watched in stunned silence as the waters grew calm again.

"That thing'll sink like a chromion anvil," one of the crewman said in an awed voice.

Suddenly, cheers rang out as someone spotted Purpur, climbing ashore at the cove where they had left the dolphins earlier.

"Kitty's back," Bann said. "How about that?"

"I'll be vaporized!" another crewman exclaimed, as he spotted a form rising to the surface of the Western Sea.

It was Red Rian—minus the back of his jumpsuit. He began to splash through the water and make his way to the cove.

"Thank the Infinite," Nila gasped as she closed her eyes.

"Three cheers for Dann Oryzon of Aquaea," Bann roared, "the man who taught those two how to swim!"

Dann took command as soon as the cheers subsided. "Come on—all of you," he shouted. "We've got to relieve the Greebans!"

As the company dashed off to aid the embattled crewmen, Purpur helped his skipper out of the

water.

Rian looked up at the purring felinoid. "I never expected to see you again," he said. "It's a good thing the kid forced us to swim last time we were here. I only wish Lii-Arc and Neela could have seen us."

As they climbed the steep trail that led back to the cliffs, Rian looked back and scanned the ocean for a moment. "Well," he said, turning his attention back to the ascent, "considering Blorg's new body-weight, he's probably still sinking. I just hope those waters are deep . . . real deep."

An eerie silence greeted them as they reached the top of the cliffs. The plain was littered with the debris of the Dark Empire. Not one single Death Legion commando remained alive—the crew of the Hazard, aided by the replenished powers of mind of Dann, Val and Camenarpo, had seen to that.

Across the plain, Rian and Purpur saw the Taylian pirates tending to the Greeban wounded. Val and Camenarpo stood before the *Darkness Eternal*, sending waves of lethal energy inside the ship, as they finished off its crew. Nila, Dann, Ween and Oruna sprinted across the plain to greet the dripping skipper and first mate of the Hazard.

Rian swept Nila up in his arms the moment she reached him. "Oh, Rian," she said, crying for joy. "It's all over! It's all over!"

"Danni," the star-pirate said, turning to his friend, "if this lovely lady and I ever have a kid, we're gonna name it after you, and have it swimming before it can walk. You saved our lives."

"That's what friends are for," Dann replied softly, just before Purpur caught him in an affec-

tionate bear hug.

Ween was at the edge of the cliff, staring down into the waters, when something caught his eye. "You're not going to believe this, folks," he said, obviously not believing it himself, "but Blorg's back."

"Oh, no," the star-pirate groaned, as he looked down and saw the mechanoid monster dragging itself onto the rocks. "What the hell do you have to do to get rid of that thing for keeps?"

"He's indestructible," Nila said flatly, just as the demon of the machine caught sight of them and howled in fury.

"Oh-oh," Ween said. "Here he comes. What are we gonna do?"

Oruna gripped his arm. "Ween, I've got an idea," she told him. The others all turned to stare at her as she whispered intensely in the boy-genius' ear.

Ween nodded. "It might just work," he said. "Listen, Rian," he told the star-pirate, "you guys get over there with the rest of the crew. An' tell them all to be ready to get rid of their weapons and belt buckles—all metal objects they have on them."

"I don't get it, Ween."

"I haven't got time to explain, but you'll know what's happening if it works. Just tell everybody what I said. And stall Blorg for as long as you can, okay? C'mon, Oruna." The pair turned and dashed off in the direction of the *Darkness Eternal*.

"I intended to do that anyway," Rian yelled after them. "Let's beat it," he told the others. "Blorg's halfway up the cliff."

When Blorg reached the top of the cliff, he saw the Hazard's company massed together a thousand yards across the plain. *They're making this very easy for me,* he reflected with satisfaction. Then the demon of the machine began to advance on his enemies, breaking into a smooth trot as he did.

"Here comes the old trash-can!" one of the Taylians said.

"Stand by," Rian told them all, as Blorg's honking roar shattered the stillness of the afternoon.

"Homies out," the star-pirate ordered quietly.

Two barrel-shaped robots rolled forward, halting fifteen feet in front of the Hazard's company.

"Number one—fire!" Rian barked. The Devastator was now five hundred yards away.

The homing robot on their left bent over as the lid that surmounted the barrel of its body swung open. *Vvv-wooom! Vvv-woom!* A volley of minimissiles flared as they shot into the air.

BOOM! BAROOM! The missiles caught the Devastator square in the chest, and he disappeared in a blinding flash. When the smoke clared, the Hazard's crew muttered among themselves in disbelief. Blorg had been thrown back fifty feet—but he was unharmed. The god of Sserp howled triumphantly as he got back on his feet and began to advance once more.

"Indestructible," Rian muttered as he shook his head. When Blorg was about two hundred feet away, the star-pirate ordered the second robot to open fire. The missiles scored another direct hit, but the result was exactly the same as before.

"That's it for number two, skipper," one of the Greeban gunners informed Rian. "And there's

only one volley left in number one."

"Prepare to scatter after the last volley," Rian told the others, as Blorg came forward once more. "I don't know what Ween's got up his sleeve, but it had better be good."

Rian waited until the demon of the machine was only fifty yards away before he gave the order to fire. The ground beneath his feet shook as the missiles exploded right on target, their impact sending Blorg through the air to land—with an incredible *clonk*!—a hundred feet away.

Blorg watched the Hazard's company fan out as he rose to his feet again. *All I have to do is keep them away from the starships,* the Devastator calculated. *Then I can tear them to pieces at leisure.* He strode forward gracefully, and then broke into a run.

"You all go that way," Rian told the others. "Purr, come with me." The cat-man nodded. "If we can beat him to the Hazard, we'll be able to activate the engines and blow him back into the sea." The two turned abruptly and tore off in the direction of the Hazard.

Blorg roared like a demented engine when he was this, and sped off to intercept them. Rian and his first mate ran faster than they ever had before, but the demon of the machine gained on them effortlessly, laughing the brass laughter of its blood-lust.

As the *Darkness Eternal* loomed up before him, Rian looked over his shoulder: *Blorg was right behind him!*

"*Peel off!*" Rian screamed, swerving to the left. The cat-man swerved sharply to the right. The glint of metal caught Rain's eye as Blorg streaked

past him, bearing down on Purpur.

"*Duck*!" he grunted, just as Blorg's metal arms reached out to grab the felinoid's silver mane. Suddenly, Purpur stopped short and hit the ground. Blorg tripped and sailed over him, landing with a crash.

But he was up with unbelievable speed and alacrity: Ylang-Ylang certainly had built well! He overtook Purpur in a second, and slammed him to the ground with a fierce blow that knocked the felinoid unconscious.

Rian halted to catch his breath as Blorg turned and came at him. He whipped out his zapper and steadied it with his other hand, squinting into the gunsight as the huge silver form began to fill its grid.

Whaang! Whaang! Blorg laughed as the lasers hit him. He slowed down to a walk as the star-pirate discharged his weapon in a futile attempt to stop him.

Now, Rian, the metallic horror told his arch-enemy, throwing open his four powerful and gleaming arms, *prepare for your descent to hell!*

The star-pirate was about to run again when he suddenly felt a great force pull at his body. He opened his hand and watched his zapper fly off in the direction of the *Darkness Eternal*. Then he tore off his belt, and saw it take off—buckle first—after the zapper. Rian hit the ground as a shower of zappers, knives, laser-rifles, belt buckles—and the two homing robots!—whizzed overhead. He silently thanked the Inifinite that he had sent the robot and android couples back to the Hazard for repairs.

Clang! Blang! Tong! Tong! Blong! A metal

storm broke on the *Darkness Eternal*. Clinging like barnacles, metal objects of all shapes and sizes studded the hull of the great black starship. As Rian looked up—and saw the demon of the machine raise his metal foot, about to stomp him to death—he heard the hatch of the *Darkness Eternal whoosh* open.

Death make you. . . . Blorg's thoughts abruptly trailed off in mid-sentence.

His eyes wide as flying saucers, Rian got slowly to his feet as he watched the Devastator's arms flail in the air. *Blorg was struggling to maintain his balance!*

The demon of the machine roared horribly as he began to lurch backwards, helpless in the grip of the force that was drawing him inexorably to the *Darkness Eternal*. Arms thrashing in the air, Blorg bellowed and fell backward with a great clatter.

"*Hahahahahaaaa!*" Rian laughed like a maniac and jumped up and down with joy as the hepless Blorg's metal body whipped over the plain, streaking like a silver torpedo toward the black starship. Cheers went up in the distance, as Blorg shot through the hatch and disappeared inside. A moment later, a hellish clangor of metal striking metal greeted the ears of those on the plain.

Inside the Dark Empire starcruiser, Blorg was pinned to one of the bulkheads outside of the engine room, his four metal arms extended sidewise in a cruciform position. Ween Leever emerged from the engine room, walked up to the stupefied and helpless demon of the machine, and waggled an accusing finger under Blorg's nose.

"You're finished, you overgrown scrap heap," Ween told the lord of the Ysss sternly. "This is it

for you. You're never gonna bother anybody again.''

Blorg was too stunned to protest as Ween turned and walked away without even so much as a backward glance. ''Oruna,'' he heard him call out as he went to the ship's control-center, ''activate the timer on the auto-pilot!'' Blorg only began to roar and struggle when he heard the couple's footsteps sounding in the corridor that led to the ship's hatch, and heard the growing roll of thunder that signalled the activation of the engines of the *Darkness Eternal.*

''*You can't kill me, you idiots,*'' the god of Sserp roared, ''*I'm immortal!*''

''We'll see about that,'' Ween Leever said, as he and Oruna raced across the plain.

Accompanied by the cheers of the Hazard's crew and passengers, the giant black starship rose into the sky on a column of flame and disappeared from sight. . . .

''Weenie-boy,'' Rian yelled, as he lifted his chief tech-head off his feet and swung him around in the air, ''how did you do it?''

''Well,'' the boy-genius replied breathlessly after Rian had put him down, ''it was actually Oruna's idea. After a little puttering, we managed to reverse the ship's anti-gravs, thereby creating a tremendous magnetic field.''

''Oruna, you're the greatest!'' the star-pirate exclaimed, interrupting Ween's long-winded technical explanation to give the young woman from the galaxy of Phorbos a big, smacking kiss.

''What happens to Blorg now?'' asked Nila.

''Blorg's made up mostly of an alloy that's

something like durallium, y'know,'' Ween told her. ''And the melting-point of durallium is. . . .'' He scratched his head. ''I wish I had a slide-rule.''

''Well?'' Rian asked impatiently. ''What's that got to do with it?''

''It's got everything to do with it,'' Oruna told him, smiling that sassy smile of hers. '' 'Cause we put Blorg's ship on a course for the biggest one of them,'' she said, pointing up into the air, directly at the twin suns of Aquaea. . . .

''*Immortal! I'm immortal!*'' was all that the magnetically-crucified Blorg screamed over and over, as the *Darkness Eternal* sped toward its flaming destination.

''*I'm immortal! As immortal as Ylang-Ylang itself!*''

Blorg only stopped screaming when his plastic body-parts started to melt, and his brain began to fry in the hot, metal pan of his skull. . . .

EPILOGUE

Somewhere Out Among The Stars

There was a wild Urgellian boy,
Red Rian was his name,
The Hazard was his only home,
The stars all knew his fame.

At the early age of sixteen years,
He left his native home,
In galaxies both far and near,
He was inclined to roam.

He fought the snakes, he helped the poor,
Defied Ylang's viceroy,
A terror to the Dark Empire
Was the wild Urgellian boy.

In Primula, he led the League,
Beside the great Garthane,
And even when they said retreat,
He went on in again.

He faced the emp'ror in its lair,
He smashed its hissing toy,
But only Nila captured him,
Our wild Urgellian boy.

The Wild Urgellian Boy,
Taylian Ballad

As the good ship Hazard touched-down at Merport, Dann Oryzon's hometown, it was greeted by the cheers of the grateful Aquaeans. But there was bad news waiting for the ship's company, as well.

They were met at the spaceport by Ilax and Aleana. The two Kallidorians were in a state of shock, and it was only with great difficulty that they told the others of Ylang's end, the destruction of their homeworld . . . and the death of Garthane.

There was a moment of stunned silence. Then everybody wept, even the tough and hardened Taylian pirates, even the robots and androids.

"Garthane's dead, Camenarpo," Dann said, wiping his eyes.

The man with the face of an ecstatic hawk smiled sadly and threw an arm around the young Aquaean's shoulder. "Yes, Garthane is dead," he replied gently. "But he died in the service of life. There is no greater honor."

"Ylang's dead, too," Val whispered to Dann as she stroked his hair. "And the Dark Empire along with it."

"The great adventure is over," Dann said softly, remembering his father's last words.

"And freedom has come," Camenarpo told them. "A new age begins."

"Amen to that," Red Rian sighed fervently. "I don't think I could have stood much more of the old one." He winced as Purpur gave him a playful jab in the ribs.

Dann smiled at his friends. "I guess this is goodbye, Rian," he said. "The League and the Fellowship are going to be busy for years to come, straightening out the mess Ylang-Ylang left behind. We'll be all over the stars . . . and we might not see each other again for a long, long time." He took Nila's hand.

"That's not how it will be, Dann," she said in a husky voice. "Remember the pledge you and Rian and I made. We'll always be with each other."

"Damn right we will," the star-pirate agreed, sniffling loudly as he did.

Dann, Val and Camenarpo left the next day. To the great delight of the Hazard's company, Camenarpo informed them that he was going to submit Dann's name in the Fellowship's forthcoming election of a new High Master. "Garthane would have liked that," he said.

Just before he departed, Dann said goodbye to the survivors of his foster-family, Mrs. Maraner and her daughters, Tali and Nona. And someone else was there, too . . . his best friend, Zak Spar. Zak had flown in from Aurea Solis, where he had been teaching the League's guerilla warfare.

"Zakki," Dann told his friend, "I'm gonna miss you."

"The hell you are," Zak Spar replied with a smile. "I'm going with you."

The others remained at Merport for another two

weeks while they waited for the wounded among the crew to recover. And Ilax and Aleana stayed with them. Rian was disturbed by a vague, shadowy notion that he ought to break Ilax' jaw, but he couldn't for the life of him understand or remember why he felt that way.

On the night of their last day on Aquaea, Nila told Rian that she suddenly felt very tired, and left the farewell banquet early. When she got back to their quarters, someone was waiting for her.

"Oh, Ilax!" she exclaimed, as the lumi-discs activated. "You startled me. Why aren't you at the banquet?"

He said nothing, but merely turned his beautiful face and sightless eyes to her and smiled strangely.

"Did you want to tell me something?" she asked, as an eerie, golden music began to rise in the back of her consciousness.

Ilax stared at her with white, sightless eyes and the totality of his senses. "I love you, Nila," he said simply.

After the banquet, Red Rian entered the darkened room. "Nila," he whispered, "I'm back, honey."

There was no answer but the silence of the dark room. Rian groped his way over to the bed. Nila wasn't there.

As he turned on the lights and made his way through the apartment, Rian suddenly recalled the reason why he wanted to break Ilax' jaw.

"*Nila*," he yelled, dashing out of the front door and bolting down the outside corridor. "*Nila*!"

Leaving a shaken and weeping Aleana in her

room, Rian alerted his crew and told them all to meet him at the Hazard. Ween and Oruna were waiting for him when he arrived at the gates of the spaceport.

"We just got the news from ground-control," Ween told him. "Ilax' ship lifted off about an hour ago."

"Oh, Zel!" the star pirate moaned. For once in his life, the resourceful Red Rian was at a loss for what to do next. "How," he asked plaintively, "among all the stars in all the galaxies out there, will I ever find Nila?"

Ween and Oruna came up to console him. "Don't worry, Rian," Ween told him as he reached into his pocket and pulled something out for his skipper to see. Rian looked at Ween's hand and saw a thin golden disc. It was a Greeban tracer, the finest of all tracers made.

"Y'know, I never trusted that guy," Ween said. "So just before we left Kallidor, I slapped a couple of these on his stabilizers. You'll find Nila."

"You're damned right I will, Weenie-boy!" the star-pirate exclaimed with a grin like a drawn saber. He was his old self once more. "Let's go, kids!" he told them, as he turned and dashed off in the direction of the good ship Hazard.

"Here we go again," Ween said, as he tried to remember what a quiet, normal life was like.

"Let's do it, Chief Tech-head Ween Leever," Oruna said, smiling her bold, sassy smile and locking arms with her lover.

"Yes, dear," Ween Leever sighed, looking up at the sky and turning his face to the stars.

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